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THE DEAN AND HIS DAUGHTER

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BY

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CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN MALTBY lost no time. He came down from London indeed the very next day; and I had very little to tell him which he did not know already, as his father had, of course, forestalled me, and also, I am glad to say, rather spoiled his own game by rushing up at once to London red hot with a version of his own as to what had taken place between us at our interview.

This version, to any one who knew me in the slightest degree, was, on the very

face of it, absurdly inaccurate; and it not unnaturally failed in the effect it was intended to produce; so that Maltby had returned in a rage and more than ever determined that we should be married as soon as the necessary period of mourning due to his brother's memory had expired.

This he pressed upon me in the most impetuous manner, evidently not anticipating for a moment the least objection on my part.

“We shall have to wait a bit, of course,” he said. “The grave as yet has hardly closed over my poor brother. But there is no occasion whatever to wait for long. There is a certain prescribed period of mourning; but I have no intention whatever of protracting it, in a matter which so nearly concerns my own

happiness, and in which I have already had so much anxiety. If you had known my brother you would, I am sure, have shared in my feeling towards him. As it is you can quite understand the grounds for a delay, which, under any other circumstances, would be intolerable."

It was some few seconds before I could bring myself to answer him at all. Then I said slowly: "I am certain you mean all that you say, but I must not allow it to alter my determination. Nothing on earth shall ever persuade me to marry into a family where, to put the matter as plainly as possible, I am not wanted, or to create a hopeless bitterness between a father and his only son. From his own point of view your father is perfectly justified. He might no doubt have taken matters in another light—a wider and a

more generous one; but he fully believes himself right in his own course of conduct, and is acting conscientiously and from a strict sense of duty."

"I don't see it at all," Maltby angrily interposed. "He has some expectation of a peerage upon which he has long set his heart, and he is very anxious that nothing whatever should interfere with his hopes. He is only human after all. He holds his own judgment to be infallible, and he is certain that our marriage would be fatal both to my prospects and to his own. I begin to think that he would have refused his consent on my account alone, or at any rate have given it most unwillingly and ungraciously; but now that he imagines his own prospects to be at all in danger he is thoroughly roused. We have often laughed together, you and I, when comparing your

father to Jephthah. I certainly have no intention whatever of playing Jephthah's son. It is an entirely new rôle, and was, I am confident in my own mind, never created for myself."

"I cannot help it," I replied. "I, too, mean exactly what I say. I will never marry again under circumstances which shall leave it even possible for my husband to discover that the marriage has wrecked his career or even hindered its course. He might not cast it in my teeth, or even allude to it in the least degree; but he would be certain to feel it and to let it prey upon his mind, even if he kept silence. Pray do not tell me that I am selfish in this matter and am only considering myself. I am sure that you will see that I am considering you as well. Besides, it is possible that we

might have children, and we ought to think of them as well as of ourselves."

He said a great deal in answer, speaking very rapidly and very impassionedly, but he had nothing to urge that could in any way move me; and so I told him very plainly.

The interview was now getting too painful for either of us to endure it any longer, and we brought it to a close by a sort of mutual consent. I kissed him fondly, and then to please him put on my hat and went down with him towards the barracks.

We met the Colonel and his wife, with whom we exchanged a very friendly greeting, and finally I left him at the barrack gates, and wished him a pleasant journey back to town, and as quick a return as possible to Easthampton. I

did this with a guilty conscience, as I had made up my mind fully that when he came back, he should find I had taken my flight.

Then I walked slowly back to my house; and when I had entered it, and found myself alone, the full bitterness, loneliness, and humiliation of my position burst upon me in all its hideous reality, and oppressed me so terribly, that I fairly broke down.

Tears, however, are of no substantial and practical value in this world. You cannot weep the seal from off a bond or the stamp from a promissory note. Women, no doubt, habitually cry. I suppose it is constitutional with us. But on this occasion if I had any tears, or any fountain for them, it was wholly dried up, and I faced the position as calmly as if I were

infested by the enemy, and every possible base and line of communication completely cut off.

I sat up till late pondering over the situation; but, twist and turn it how I might under the object-glass, it presented only one unvarying aspect. I must leave Easthampton, and the sooner I left it the better it would be for everybody concerned, myself included.

I tried every other possible solution of the problem with the result of signal failure. There is a certain period of time, so I have been assured by an eminent mathematician, after which, when an equation still baffles you, you do best to abandon it as insoluble. No equation is insoluble unless it be of the third degree, that is to say, unless it involves three unknown difficulties with each and

all of which you are required so to deal as to bring out a neat and satisfactory result.

Now in my own position there were at least a dozen unforeseen difficulties, towards none of which could I see an approximate solution. In fact, there were even more. Could an earthquake have swallowed up Maltby's father in one good wholesome cataclysmic gulf, the whole thing would have been at an end; but he was very much alive, and, to put the case roughly, as vigorous and lively as Jeshurun, of whom it is recorded upon the most unquestionable authority in the world that he waxed fat and kicked.

What I wanted for myself was a life of peace and quiet. It might be ever so simple, but peaceful it must be; and, from the most selfish point of view, I was firmly

resolved that on no account would I allow myself to be launched into a belt of cyclones.

What then remained for me to do? It may seem an ignominious confession, but I yet candidly own that I could discover only one course open to me, which was, to beat a dignified retreat with all possible speed. The more I reviewed the situation the more this conviction gained upon me; and at last I determined to act upon it without the least delay, and, when I had finally screwed my courage up to this last sticking-place, I fairly clapped my hands with delight.

The next morning at an unusually early hour for me I set to work. My bills to tradesmen in the place were few in number and insignificant in amount. I walked round with my purse in my hand and settled

every one of them, arranging at the same time for the relinquishment of my victoria and cob. I then returned home, and there found the house-agent, for whom I had sent, and who, having made fully sufficient inquiries before he accepted me as a tenant, did not now so much as even suggest a difficulty.

I arranged with him to let the house, if possible, for the remainder of my term, and, until he could do so, to put a caretaker into it. A bottle of champagne and a biscuit made him my most devoted servant.

I wonder why it is that the English *bourgeois* class gauge everything by champagne. Offer them the finest Lafitte or the very choicest Steinberg and they taste it suspiciously, as if it were Medoc or cheap Chablis. Bring out champagne, no matter what brand or vintage, provided that the

cork be big and new, and there be plenty of tinfoil and paper label about the bottle, and then, if the cork comes out with a crack like that of a rifle, and the liquid bubbles over in the fashion of ginger-pop, you become at once in their eyes the perfect gentleman, or, as the case may be, the perfect lady. There are actually some people to whom it seems to have never occurred as a possible idea that there is any other test of good breeding and solvency than the drinking of champagne.

That afternoon I started for town, making my way to the station by a slightly circuitous route on foot, and arranging for my luggage and personal effects to be separately despatched. With a thick veil and in travelling costume I escaped notice at the booking-office and on the platform. A gratuity to the guard

secured me a compartment to myself, which he assured me he would preserve inviolate throughout the journey by informing any one who might wish to enter it that I was just recovering from scarlet-fever, and that the carriage would have to be thoroughly disinfected as soon as it arrived in London.

When a railway official has been paid to lie, he performs his own part of the contract faithfully, and earns his money like a man.

Arrived in London, I took up my quarters at the Langham. It is a large hotel, with shadowy staircases and dark landings. A man may very well live in it for a month, and, unless he uses the smoking-room or the coffee-room, never discover that his own brother has been all the same time with him under the same roof. If, say the police, you

wish for your own private reasons to hide yourself, do not run away to a little country village where you are at once an object of curiosity to everybody, but choose a busy market town, and boldly take lodgings in one of its principal streets.

The secret is an open one. Edgar Allan Poe built his story of the purloined letter upon it. And from this point of view I installed myself in a charming little *entresol* suite at the Langham. Here, at any rate, I was in the centre of London, and could make my way to any quarter without being tracked. And when I had arranged for my rooms for a certain number of weeks, and had done a little towards relieving the painfully uniform monotony of the hotel furniture, I felt comparatively comfortable.

My boxes and other effects arrived in due course. With these about me I could say

with the old Roman, “*Omnia mea mecum porto.*” I was ready, like Sir Colin Campbell before he became Lord Clyde, to start for anywhere at an hour’s notice.

CHAPTER II.

As soon as I had settled down I arranged with an advertising agent and announced to the world at large, through the medium of the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, and the *Saturday Review*, that a lady of birth and education desired to reside in the house of a country clergyman. She would, the advertisement continued, bring her own maid if required, and there was no objection to children.

The morning after my advertisement appeared, I received, at a very moderate

computation, five hundred letters, each of which offered me the most exceptional advantages. The shower of communications continued for four or five days, although the advertisements were only inserted once.

I felt something of the perplexity which must beset a Civil Service examiner as I opened this mass of correspondence and sorted it out. But the task of selection, when once I set myself to it, proved easy. Many of my applicants lived in utterly impossible places. I thus weeded out three-fourths at the first flap of the winnowing sieve—confused metaphors are pardonable in clerical matters. Of the remaining quarter, after careful attention, at least half stood condemned on their own showing. Ultimately I pitched upon what I may term a selected half-dozen, and of this chosen six

again, I decided upon one with whom I would first communicate.

The Reverend Mr. Stockfold was a Lincolnshire Rector, and his Rectory was about ten miles from Boston, and about four from the coast. He was a married man, of course, and had a somewhat large family, but received no boarders or pupils. If I desired it, I could have a large private sitting-room, and, except on Sundays, could, by arrangement, have my meals at my own hours and in my own room. There was a large garden and stabling if I should require it. But he felt bound to tell me that he had hardly any neighbours, and that I must expect to find the place lonely.

“Lonely!” Why, it was the very place I wanted. I should be entirely out of the

world, within easy access of London, and should be living under circumstances which would enable me to maintain a practically safe incognito.

My letter went off by the next post with a reference to my bankers. Bankers are discreet persons, never saying more than they need. They, of course, would reply that Mrs. Gascoigne (I still retained my recent *nom de guerre*) had, to the best of their knowledge, an income considerably exceeding her annual drafts upon them, and that her account was of some standing, and had been favourably introduced.

Such, as I soon afterwards ascertained, was the exact tenour of their letter. It served Mrs. Gascoigne's purpose completely. That good lady, with a heart full of forgiveness and Christian feelings towards all

her persecutors, spent a week or two longer in London from which she felt a strange disinclination to tear herself. She purchased books, carefully avoiding anything in the slightest degree questionable. She also procured some country costumes, which were pleasant and elegant, but not at all calculated to arouse hostility or jealousy.

Superfluities of any kind she avoided. People in the country regard them with suspicion. She even took the precaution of depositing her jewels, with the exception of a few plain trinkets, in the vaults of her bankers. Then she started for Lincolnshire with three trunks and a travelling bag (there was literally nothing more), and by timing her journey, and by a little sacrifice in the way of early rising, contrived to reach her ultimate destination a little before dinner time.

Mrs. Gascoigne—that is to say, I—was favourably impressed by the Reverend Mr. Stockfold, by his wife, and by the numerous olive branches of the Stockfold family. Before the day was over I had found out all about them without telling them a word about myself.

Mrs. Stockfold had been the fourth or fifth or sixth daughter of a cotton lord. Mr. Stockfold, who had taken a second-class in Law and Modern History, and could play the flute, had been domestic tutor to one of the cotton lord's sons. When that great magnate had been informed by the young people of the affection which they entertained for one another, he had replied that except in so far as they might involve financial arrangements he never, on principle, took any part in domestic matters. He had no objection, however, to the marriage; and

suggested that, instead of tying up a little money in Three per Cents, it would be better by far to buy a living at once, and make arrangements for the speedy withdrawal, on grounds of ill health or any other, of its immediate occupant.

This sound advice was acted upon; and such was the family in the bosom of which I now found myself. From the father down to the second daughter, who was just old enough to be self-conscious, they seemed, so far as I could make out to be, simple, homely, unaffected people, curious about me, no doubt, but not offensively or even inquisitively so, and rather intending to frame their opinion for themselves and from my own course of conduct than from anything which I might let drop, or which they might otherwise pick up.

At last, I said to myself with almost

pious gratitude over my evening cup of tea — which, by-the-way, was not at all ungenerously weak—at last I really think I have found rest for the sole of my foot, and people with whom it will be possible to dwell together in unity, and to enjoy a refreshing sense as of the precious ointment which overflowed Aaron's beard, and ran down to the skirts of his clothing.

And yet when I took my previous disasters into account, such good fortune seemed incredible.

Next day, in company with two of the girls, I explored the neighbourhood. The roads in Lincolnshire, or, at any rate, in this part of it, are perfectly flat. A Lincolnshire farmer driving along them in his gig can see and recognise another Lincolnshire farmer coming in the opposite direction

at the distance of a mile, or, in clear weather, of a mile and a half. The country is intersected with great dykes full of stagnant water which are crossed by squat stone bridges. The fields are delimited by smaller dykes or scrubby hedges, and sometimes by low walls of rubble. A tree is a rare object, and a clump of trees or a single tree of any size seems to serve as a landmark for all the adjacent neighbourhood. The industry of Lincolnshire seems to be entirely agricultural. You see, according to the season, cattle of various ages and crops of various kinds; and there are also any number of windmills, but factory chimneys are happily conspicuous by their absence. I should say that in Lincolnshire a Dutchman would feel more or less at home, were it not for an uneasy

sense that the whole place was too large for him and that he had somehow lost his bearings.

The manners of the natives are rough but kindly, their costume is picturesque, and their dialect barbarous. The men are tall and sturdy. The women seem, as a rule, to be remarkably handsome until they reach five-and-twenty years or thereabouts, after which they are usually crippled with rheumatism. This fact did not disquiet me, as I had no intention myself of permanently taking up my abode among the ducks and frogs in the Fens.

I could really notice nothing else except that the cottagers all seemed to eke out their income by keeping ducks and bees. My companions assured me that ducks in Lincolnshire feed themselves, and that

Lincolnshire honey is sound and marketable, although utterly destitute of the true flavour of gorse and heather.

On the whole it was a dull and monotonous outlook for me, and I began to think of the great city of Philadelphia, U.S., where the strictest Quaker in his most strictly sober moments is occasionally puzzled to find his own house owing to the fact that every street is as exactly like every other street, and every house as exactly like every other house as are the stones with which the streets are paved and the bricks with which the houses are built.

At the end of our walk I came to the conclusion that the Rectory was the only thing in the neighbourhood which was not wholly monotonous. It had originally consisted of two rooms on the ground floor, two rooms over these, and two attics.

A wing had been added at one end with two rooms on the ground floor, two bed-rooms, and two attics again. Then a similar wing had been erected at the other extremity of the building. The process was capable of indefinite multiplication. It would be difficult to conceive a house more unlike your modern Gothic villa, which seems to me to stand in much the same relation to all wholesome rules of architecture as do the pieces of a Chinese puzzle, when shaken out upon the table, to the first book of the Elements of Euclid.

But there was a large garden, and a lawn with tall poplars, and an orchard, and kitchen-garden, and there were outbuildings for cows and pigs and poultry and agricultural stores—for your Lincolnshire parson is always a farmer, and sometimes a very good farmer too—and the whole of the little domain,

house, outbuildings, gardens, and everything was enclosed by a scrubby belt of firs and larches dignified with the title of the plantation.

There were, I found, only two sources of trouble in this bucolic Elysium. Wasps were frequent, as they always are near stagnant water, and played terrible havoc among the choice fruit, while it was not at all an uncommon thing for a fox to visit the poultry-yard even in broad daylight.

I began to think of the stock quotation of the Very Reverend the Dean, “*O fortunati nimium!*” To be more practical and to end my chapter in a matter-of-fact manner, I may make the following general observations.

(1.) Lincolnshire air is wholesome upon the whole, but is apt, especially at first, to make those who are not accustomed

to it drowsy to a point little short of lethargy.

(2.) This habitual drowsiness is much increased by the immense appetite which is peculiar to the aborigines and is rapidly acquired by strangers.

(3.) Lincolnshire is eminently peaceful. It seems impossible that anything should excite you or that you should allow yourself to get excited about anything. A Lincolnshire hen when she has laid an egg cackles less about it than do hens in other counties. And the very swallows that pursue the drowsy flies through the moist air differ as much from the swallows of the sunny South as does a Heavy Dragoon from a picked trooper out of a smart Lancer regiment.

Seriously I began to wonder whether the influences of the place might not pos-

sibly grow upon me. We had family prayers, I found, at half-past nine o'clock every evening. After prayers everybody went to bed, with the exception of the master of the house, who stopped up to write his sermons. This literary effort used to occupy him about an hour, and at the conclusion of his task a quick nose might detect in the atmosphere just the suspicion, and nothing more, of tobacco and Dutch Hollands. But I may be, perhaps, uncharitable. The Lincolnshire coast is notorious for its smugglers, and it is just possible that these worthies, laden with schiedam and tobacco, passed the house every night in the course of their business after the majority of its inmates had retired to rest. If so, I never saw anything of them, as I was always in bed and far too comfortable to go to the window.

And here I may add, what I had almost forgotten, that the Rectory walls were thickly covered with honeysuckle and small white roses which thrust themselves in through my diamond-paned window the moment I opened it to admit the morning air.

CHAPTER III.

ON the whole, I found myself fairly comfortable—I might almost say very comfortable indeed, and I soon began to fraternise with my new friends.

The Rector himself was a meek, amiable man, whose one desire, it seemed to be, was to have as little trouble in life as possible.

An English clergyman, unless he be distinctly ambitious, is usually of this type. I believe, in fact, that very few men become, as did Robertson of Brighton, clergymen from conviction and because

they feel that they have a distinct calling for clerical work. They take Orders because there is a family living waiting for them, or because they have influence and are certain of a living, or else they drift into Holy Orders, as did my father, because they have been failures at the University, and there is nothing else left for them to do. They go up to college intending to get a Fellowship, and to astonish the world. They fall through hopelessly into an ordinary degree, without a Fellowship, and they take the priest's office that they may eat a morsel of bread.

Mr. Stockfold was one of those who drift into Holy Orders. What his original views may have been early in life, I cannot undertake to say. I presume that, like his hair, they were more or less

colourless; but when he found himself with a University degree, no income, and no probable means of earning one, he had clearly but three courses open to him.

One of these was to drive a cab, or otherwise make himself useful by pursuing some regular and respectable employment. The idea of this did not commend itself to him. The second was to nerve himself thoroughly, make a tremendous effort, and either write a book, or paint a picture, or do something or other which should enable him to wake one morning and find himself famous. He thought a great deal about this, but ultimately abandoned the idea as impracticable. The third string to his bow, and that which he ultimately decided on

adopting, was to take Orders, to make the best selection he could in the matrimonial market, and so to float placidly down the stream of life, after the traditional method of the Miller of the Dee, but without **that** gentleman's constitutional appetite for hard and wholesome labour.

The Rector was at this time fifty years of age, a temperate man, and well preserved, but indolent, and with flaccid muscles. He was a remarkably tall man, and his hair was almost as white as an albino's. All in all he was a better, and, if well dressed, would have been a much more presentable, man than my very reverend father; and, certainly, there was no nonsense and affectation about him. He did not pretend to be anything more than he was, or to know anything

more than he really knew; and, after my experience, his extreme simplicity was absolutely refreshing.

His wife was ten years younger than himself, and I ought in justice to her to say that she would anywhere have been pronounced by common consent a remarkably handsome woman, although, like most handsome women, and like many who do not even possess that excuse, she had a temper of her own which had set its marks on her face, if not on that of her lord and master.

By way of putting matters pleasantly, her friends and neighbours used to speak of her as an admirable manager, with a great deal of responsibility and very much to try her. This was a pleasant way of summing up the situation, and one which was not perhaps altogether unfair.

There were eight children of both sexes and of all ages ranging from four to about twenty. I could not see that they were likely to give me any trouble in any way, and the elder girls would no doubt be easily propitiated by small presents of antiquated gowns and other such trifles at which a lady's-maid with any ordinary pretensions to self-respect would turn up her nose.

I could see indeed that they scanned my very simple toilettes, not with the eye of criticism, but with wonder and awestruck admiration. Out of mere fun, I came down to dinner one evening in a collar and cuffs of point lace almost worth its weight in black pearls, and certainly worth many times its weight in gold.

They said it was very curious lace, and looked as if it had not been washed for a long time; and then they asked me, with

genuine curiosity, whether it was real Brussels or only Honiton.

Such is the ignorance—happy ignorance I dare say it may be, and only until recently shared by myself — of a country Rectory in the Shires. Mine, it is true, had been a Vicarage; but, as Mr. Weller sagely remarks, the principle is the same.

After I had been ensconced in my new quarters for two or three weeks, I received a letter from Ethel Fortescue.

It was of course the old story. Evidently it had been a rainy day, and she had set herself down with any amount of paper and pens and ink to scribble on about everything that interested herself, and anything that might possibly interest me.

To those who did not know her as I did, *au fond*, the letter might have

seemed incoherent and ambiguous; but I found myself perfectly able, without any great difficulty or trouble, to read between its lines.

She had her object, of course, and it was a sufficiently simple one. She wished me to join her at Dinard, where she now was, and afterwards to return with her to Paris, partly because, as she very frankly confessed, she was dull and lonely by herself, and partly because she really and honestly would like to see me again and to have me with her for a time.

Then came an immense budget of news, more or less irrelevant, desultory, and devoid of particular interest. But in the midst of this farrago, like a nugget in quartz, lay imbedded a piece of intelligence for which I was unprepared, and which

made me ultimately put the letter by for full consideration before answering it.

Prince Balanikoff, Mrs. Fortescue told me, in her plainest and bluntest manner, was at this moment at Dinard, and raving about me. He was a gentleman, of course, and did not talk about me at the Cercle, or carry about surreptitiously a photograph of myself and show it to everybody, or otherwise make my own name cheap and himself ridiculous. But he was evidently in earnest. "He still," said Mrs. Fortescue, "gambles and drinks as a Russian prince should, but it is in moderation. You remember, dear Miriam, the story of the club waiter, who was asked by a judge 'was his lordship drunk?' and replied, 'no, my lud; leastways, not more drunk than a nobleman ought to be, my lud.' Well, to put the matter plainly, he is maundering about,

evidently hard hit, and as I may frankly tell you, without making any bones about the matter, dying to see you.

“At present he is only discontented and purposeless, but I should not be at all surprised if some day he were to give a private inquiry office a commission to find you out, and were to drop from the clouds before you. Indeed he has been pestering me for your address, which, of course, I have not given him, telling him that when I last heard of you you had gone into an English convent, which I believed was either at Scarborough or else at Brighton, but I was not sure which.

“Now, oh my dear Miriam, think of what Herrick says, ‘Time is still a-flying.’ Your present life in the Fens must be about as cheerful as that of the souls who, according to Dante, are perpetually standing up to

their necks in mud and with their heads in fog. I am no mountaineer. I have never yet even been up the Rigi by train to see the sun rise. But I confess that the mere idea of the Lincolnshire Fens fills me with horror.

“Pay your worthy parson a month’s *pension*, or three months, if you like, in lieu of notice, and run over here and join me. Or, if that idea does not commend itself to you, I will leave this place and join you myself at any reasonable rendezvous. I want to have you with me again; and the more I think things over the more I am determined that you shall not play the part of Mariana in the Moated Grange, if it is in my power to prevent your doing so. The idea is simply preposterous.”

There was no immediate hurry, so I

considered the letter for a couple of days. I had at last quietly settled down into the routine of the Rectory life, and had achieved my principal object, which was to have as much of my time as possible entirely and uninterruptedly to myself.

Now that the first novelty of my appearance had worn off, and it had been discovered that I was a human being, very much like other human beings, but with perhaps rather more than the average allowance of good nature, I found it sufficiently easy, as the Scotch say, to gang my ain gait. I gave no trouble ; I carefully accommodated myself to the domestic arrangements of the household ; the Rector took me into his confidence about parish matters, and twice each Sunday asked me my opinion as to the merits of his sermon, while his wife and elder daughters

were kind and friendly with a deep and at the same time unenvious interest in the contents of my wardrobe and trunks.

So at last I wrote to Ethel to tell her that I meant to stop where I was. "I am very comfortable and happy," I said. "From a merely animal point of view I could not better myself. I never had any very great belief in the magical virtues of the climate of France or of any part of it. And the Lincolnshire Fens suit me admirably. I have no excitement here of any kind, and I find beyond question that I am better without it.

"The people with whom I am living are kind-hearted and simple, and do not know the difference between a sapphire and an amethyst, or a topaz and a cairngorm. The girls had never seen point lace

until I showed them mine, at which they marvelled as the soldiers of Pizarro did at the wealth of the Incas.

“ We have cold dinner on Sundays, so that the cook and the maids, upon whom the pastry devolves, may go to church, and the Sunday dinner hour is one; but, by way of compensation, there is an eight o’clock supper of cold meat, pickles, bread, cheese, jam, salad, and other luxuries of the season.

“ My *Illustrated London News* and *Graphic* are pounced upon eagerly, and I also take in the *Field*, because the Rector likes to see it. He says that there are most interesting articles in it on the rotation of crops and the potato blight. I dare say there are, although I do not remember having ever noticed them. The one thing I should

like to give the excellent man would be a couple of hundred thumping regalias, such as Sir Henry used to smoke; but I do not see my way as yet to manage the pious fraud, and I am afraid he must rest content for the present, at any rate, with his briar-root pipes and bird's eye. But I have had down from London a few dozen of wine and a little genuine brandy, which is properly appreciated; for, whatever the faults of these people may be, and I almost doubt if they have any, they most certainly are not hypocrites, and his wife tells me quite candidly that after his two services on the Sunday a good stiff glass of brandy and water does not, in her opinion, do her husband any harm. I think she is quite right.

“The greatest excitement that we have

had since my arrival was when the cows got into a dyke, or when they broke down a fence and attacked the new hay-rick in a body. You may, therefore, readily understand that my nerves are undergoing a complete rest.

“And so you will see, my dear, that I am as happy as if I were Abbot of Glastonbury in the olden time. Here I am, and here I mean to stick, unless I can see some better reason for moving than even your ingenuity can suggest. Suppose, now, you modify your plans and run down here and see me. We can have country rides, and chats, and famous walks, and the change will do you good as it has done me. Come and try the swamps. You may bring the Prince with you, if you like. I dare say he and his suite could find accommodation at the village beer-

house. Seriously, I have not for a moment altered my mind. Am not I a Dean's daughter? And what are we told upon the very highest authority: 'Put not your trust in Princes.' My dear child, I have no intention whatever of doing so."

Having finished this letter and sealed it, I selected a light Indian shawl, sallied out with the girls for a walk, and, to make things certain, posted my letter myself, and took the precaution of registering it—a precaution well worth the twopence which it adds to the postage.

We went out with baskets, I may add, and returned home loaded with mushrooms, some of which were that evening stewed and flavoured with port wine, which the Rector declared to be Carbonell's, and to be thrown away on such a purpose! He

happened to be wrong, for it was Sandeman's. But I consoled myself with the reflection that there was more where it came from. •

CHAPTER IV.

THERE is one little matter which I had almost forgotten. When I left Easthampton I had told the house-agent, in whose charge I had left my house, to collect my letters and to keep them for me until I wrote for them, maintaining my address a secret.

It now one day occurred to me to have such letters as there might be waiting for me forwarded. I received a perfect batch. There were tradesmen's circulars and letters soliciting a continuance of my highly-esteemed patronage, and so on. There

were one or two from acquaintances and dependents which were of no great importance and hardly called for an answer. But there was also a bundle of letters — one, in fact, and sometimes two, for every day—from Captain Maltby.

They were not brilliant, but they were yet considerably above the average of the conventional plunger. And they were honest and manly, and thoroughly sincere.

Maltby, so far as I could clearly make out, was evidently much hurt, if not angry with me, because I had not written to him. Every letter repeated the same complaint. Why did I not write? Surely I could write if it were only a line or two. I was not treating him as he deserved. Then at intervals the expostulation would assume an irritated tone. I had no right, said he, to treat any man in such a way.

Ultimately I discovered, by carefully reading the letters in the order of their dates, that he had gone down from London, and, finding me flown, had hunted up my house-agent who had discreetly declined to give any information as to Mrs. Gascoigne's whereabouts, but had undertaken to forward, without fail to that lady, any letters committed to his charge as soon as he knew her address.

Thus it came about that I now got almost a mail-bag from him, which I kept till night, and perused in bed before finally extinguishing my candle.

It is Edgar Allan Poe, I believe, who has said that, if it is necessary for you to think matters over at all, you will always find your faculties at their brightest in the dark. I very soon began to clearly see my way to the solution of what, without any

want of feeling, I can best designate as the Maltby problem.

Let me give the steps or processes in my reasoning. First of all, it was quite settled in my own mind that I was not going to marry Maltby. Secondly, I was to let him know this once again as graciously and yet as firmly as possible. Thirdly, I was to write in a manner which should, if possible, preclude further correspondence by putting him, as the schoolboys say, on his word of honour not to write again.

These "instructions," as the lawyers would call them, may perhaps seem a little complicated; but they were yet very easy to carry out. After I had composed my letter, in my own mind, I turned round and went to sleep.

Always sleep upon a difficult business and you will find that, somehow or other,

you will wake up with your head clear about it. I believe medical men tell you that, during your sleep, a process has been going on which they call unconscious cerebration ; which means, I suppose, that you have been thinking the matter out in your sleep without dreaming about it, or being in any way conscious that your mind has been occupied, and that you then wake to find all that was crooked made plain again, and all that was rough made smooth.

I can only say that the fact itself seems to me a good deal simpler than a complicated explanation which adds nothing to it. You go to bed with your head puzzled and you wake with your head clear. I fail to see any mystery in this, and prefer to consider it as a mere part of the wider fact that, in the broadest

sense of the term, you go to bed tired and wake up refreshed.

Anyhow, when I woke up next morning, my mind was as clear as a mountain lake through the waters of which, if you look straight down over the side of your boat, you can see and count the fish roaming and sporting in its depths, while, if you look aslant, you catch the reflection of the hills and mountains that surround you with the woods at their feet and the clouds wreathed in mist round their peaks.

My letter to him did not take me long. I felt that the shorter I made it, and the more I precluded the possibility of a reply, the better it would be for both of us.

I addressed him as "Dear Captain

Maltby," I begged him to consider the past as a sealed book, and not to attempt to reopen it, or to write to me again. Very few letters, I said, had passed between us, and if any of them were still in existence there was no occasion for their mutual exchange. Perhaps they had better be destroyed.

I wished the more earnestly to impress on him that these were genuinely my wishes, because I was very anxious to be always able to think of him pleasantly, and as of a true friend.

So the epistle ended, and unless Maltby were more than human, he must have heartily cursed me as a capricious cold-blooded ^{*}jilt, and himself as a fool. This, however, I could not help. People in these days of humanitarianism are not crucified or burned alive, or put on the

rack or otherwise subjected to physical torture and public infamy. But they have the agony of knowing that they are misunderstood and misrepresented. And the bitterest of all martyrs' crowns is to know that you could clear yourself in a sentence, and to feel compelled to refrain from doing so.

I am sure that any man who has ever been in the service will understand what I mean at once; and any civilian, even a lawyer, ought to be able to do so, if he only sets his mind honestly to the task.

Anyhow the letter had the effect I intended, for I did not hear from Captain Maltby again. I ascertained, however, from inquiries, which I privately instituted, that he was still with the regiment, and would probably continue in it; and that the

opinion among his brother officers seemed to be that he was thoroughly well out of his entanglement, and that I was a heartless garrison hack.

And yet in the whole affair I had acted from one motive only, and that was the future welfare of the man I had promised to marry.

I heard too, that he was likely almost immediately to obtain his majority. I dare say this was true. The longer you wait, the more rapidly promotion comes to you. It is the luckless subalterns for whom, under the present system, military life considered as a career seems absolutely hopeless.

And now to return to myself. I soon began in spite of my first impressions to find my life in the Fens intolerable. I had nothing to complain of with regard

to the Rector or the Rector's wife, or with any member of their numerous family. Indeed, their very kindness, and good-nature, and desire to make my life pleasant was, in my present irritable state of mind, almost more exasperating than would have been a daily succession of little quarrels.

Sir Henry had an old story of Sheridan, according to which that eccentric genius came one day in a great haste, and greater passion, down the staircase at White's. On his way from the card-room to the hall-door, and midway in his career, he fell foul of an elderly and inoffensive gentleman, who was arranging his shoe-lace, and incontinently kicked him down the stairs.

“What on earth have I done, Mr. Sheridan,” expostulated the unhappy man,

“that you should insult me in this way? I was only tying my shoe.”

“That’s just where it is, sir,” roared Sheridan. “That’s just where it is. You always *are* tying your shoe.”

And towards the Stockfold family I felt in the same unchristian and illogical frame of mind. From the Rector downwards, each of them was always tying his or her shoe, until I fairly lost patience; and one night, after a little supper of champagne and brown bread biscuits in my own room, decided to take my departure, giving no reason except that the air did not suit me, and taking the kindest farewell all round.

The thing when it came to be done was easy enough. I was lavish in my expressions of regard, and my leave-taking presents were, for Lincolnshire, Oriental in

their magnificence. I am sure that they were all sorry to lose me, and also that they agreed among themselves in ascribing my flight to the dulness of the place.

And here as a matter of fact they were quite right. I left Sheepley Rectory because it was so dull, and for no other reason whatever. Although surrounded there by human beings, intelligent, cheerful, and anxious to make themselves agreeable, I yet felt lonely. And I may also add that once again an irresistible desire came over me to join Ethel Fortescue, and, as the phrase goes in its most harmless sense, knock about with her a bit. Where we might go, what we should do when we got there, and how long we should stop, I was quite content to leave to her.

And so having written to her at some

length, begging her to come and see me out of charity, I found myself in the train for London, and ultimately once again in that colossal caravanserai, the Langham Hotel, where I secured three charming little rooms *en suite* on the *entresol*.

It is a long journey from the Fens to London; but yet the change of air, and the rapid motion of the train seemed, if anything, to freshen me, and that same evening, I actually, by way of contrast to the quiet life I had lately been leading, concealed my features, as well as I could, in a thick mantilla, and took my seat alone in a small private box at the Gaiety, where I fairly laughed over some ridiculous opera bouffe of which, by the next day, I had almost forgotten the name.

The morning after, while I was occupied

with my ante-toilette cup of chocolate, Ethel Fortescue made her appearance, looking younger than ever, and more than usually, even for her, busy and important.

It was hardly noon, and I was not inclined to get up. A long railway journey does not so much tire you at the time. But it takes it out of you the next day. So, instead of getting up, I received my guest in my bed-room, where we soon found ourselves comfortably chatting over the past and the present, and discussing the probabilities and possibilities of the future.

CHAPTER V.

ETHEL was radiant with good-natured envy of me. I had a splendid income, she said—any income being splendid which is more than sufficient for your wants; so that a clerk in the War Office or a subaltern in a double battalion regiment, with two or three hundred a year, is very often a rich man as compared with a duke whose many thousands a-year are swallowed up in family settlements, interest on mortgages, and the inevitable outgoings of his estates.

The only thing to do, she solemnly assured me, was to show a proper gratitude to Provi-

dence by living up to my income, and so judiciously expending it as to get out of it the maximum of enjoyment.

“You have, my dear,” she said, “the purse of Fortunatus. Every morning when you wake there is four pounds in it to be seriously spent, and very nearly a pound of loose silver for pocket-money. I consider you ought to be most distinctly grateful for your good fortune.”

“I will show my gratitude to the gods,” I replied, “by using their favours wisely. Let us get our money’s worth for our money. That shall be, as Sairey Gamp has it, our ‘mortar.’ And we will (figuratively, of course, dear Ethel) ‘put our lips to the bottle when we are so dispoged.’ And now, as I do not wish to be bothered, and feel, in fact, uncommonly lazy, I shall leave the campaign to you. Do not worry yourself too much over

the choice, as if we avoid the folly of taking a house, we shall always have it in our power to come and go at our own will."

"Then, my dear, I think I have the place cut and dried. It is now the very beginning of August. August and September are the two best months in the year, and ought to be spent in the best of all possible places. Now you know, there is Margate, and there is Oban, and there is St. Heliers."

"Are you gone mad?" I asked.

"Not quite, my dear. I was just going to remark that none of these would suit us. There are insuperable objections to each. But I know a place which combines the good qualities of them all, and which is easily accessible."

"Do pray stop skirmishing and tell me. I suppose you have been there, and if so, can describe it."

“Perfectly, my dear. I have been there and I mean to go again, and this time I mean to go with you, and the name of the place is Trouville, and we can amuse ourselves there till the end of the month.”

Trouville! I had heard of it, of course, just as I had heard of Saratoga, and with just as little thought of seriously going there. Now I jumped at the idea.

“All right, Ethel. Trouville be it. To avoid further bother, and to prevent the very possibility of our changing our minds, we will say no more about the matter at all to-day, either for or against it, and we'll start to-morrow morning.”

Ethel had been turning over that invaluable book, the “Continental Bradshaw.” “We must either start to-morrow night, or else we must lose very nearly three clear days. The boats only go three times a

week. It's as difficult almost as getting to Heaven."

"Then we'll start to-morrow; and to-day I vote that, instead of wasting time and money and trying our tempers, and adding to the bulk of our luggage by shopping, we run quietly out into the country. Now, there is Hampstead Heath, there is the big pond at Hendon, there is Epping Forest, there is 'Appy 'Ampton——"

We both began to laugh.

"It is a glorious day, Miriam, and we can get a decent fly here at the hotel. Let us do the old-fashioned thing—drive quietly down to Richmond, taking the road through the Park, dine at the 'Talbot,' and so come virtuously home."

This little programme was followed out. I wonder how many Londoners really know how beautiful the environs of London, as dis-

tinguished from its suburbs, are in the best part of the year.

Were Windsor, or Richmond, or Hampton Court anywhere near Paris, we should cross the Channel to visit them. Just because we can get to them for a few shillings, it never occurs to us to go.

We had a capital day of it, and so thoroughly discussed our campaign over a very excellent fish dinner, as to leave literally nothing to be settled. Ethel, as I have said, seemed younger, and was certainly more petulant than ever. She insisted on our sitting for an hour over our wine after dinner, greatly to the astonishment of the waiter, and noticing the bewilderment of that functionary, she mischievously drove him nearly insane with wonder by finishing up with a liqueur glass of kirschwasser, and solemnly as-

suring him that it settled your wine better than any liqueur she knew.

These little vulgarities somewhat jarred upon me, but I was glad to ignore them for the sake of my friend's many excellent qualities.

Then, in her own language, we paid our shot, and rattled back to town. Next evening we left London for Trouville, *via* Waterloo and Southampton.

When I found myself at Trouville, I was charmed with it. It is one of those few places in the world which make you ask yourself why you were never there before, and why on earth you should have wasted time and money and patience over such resorts as Scarborough, or Cowes, or Brighton.

And yet it is difficult to say wherein precisely the charm of Trouville lies.

There is nothing about it of the natural beauty of the Riviera, although it is certainly picturesque and, in the old English sense of the word, pleasant. The climate is refreshing, but not remarkably so. On the whole I should be disposed to attribute the hold Trouville has upon its admirers to the absence of any definite quality, or recommendation, over which you can be expected to excite yourself. All you can say is that you like the place. Asked why you like it, the first answer is that you do not exactly know, and the second that at Trouville it is impossible to get bored.

There is always something to do, and something to amuse you, so, that the days follow one another, and you lose reckoning. It was just the very place we wanted.

We put up at the Hôtel de Paris, close to the Casino, and with a day to rest after the journey, and to do nothing but rest, and a second day devoted to what Ethel called "settling down into our stride," we found ourselves on the third morning with that indescribable feeling of vitality and energy which can only be enjoyed on the shores of the "Grand, great mother; mother and lover of men, the sea."

It was a very pleasant life. We bathed in the morning; breakfasted off fresh fish, fruit, and ices at the Casino; walked or drove as the fancy took us, or even cultivated the noble art of doing nothing, which, if you do not allow it to engross you and unduly carry you away, is one of the most fascinating pursuits I know, and infinitely preferable to either flirting or

baccarat. You never lose your temper over it, you cannot very well lose your money.; and should you find it, like other pleasant habits growing upon you, you can very easily give it up.

Assiduous doing nothing brought us up to the hour of *table d'hôte*, and after *table d'hôte* there is always something to be done in a mild and harmless way, if it be only to watch the dancing at the Casino, to listen to the concert, or to stake your francs on the *petits chevaux*.

We did all these things, and strictly followed out the true philosophy, as I heard it expounded at Salchester by an erudite Minor Canon. Other philosophy, said that young divine, begins with the assumption that if you are virtuous you will be happy, and consequently many

people bewilder themselves with the endeavour to discuss the secret of virtue. True philosophy laughs at all other forms. It says you are confounding cause and effect. You are putting the cart before the horse. All good men are happy, no doubt; but it is equally certain that all happy men are good. Look after your happiness, my children, and your virtue will come quite naturally of itself, without any effort or self-denial on your own part.

The erudite Minor Canon, though convinced of its truth, mentioned this doctrine sadly, and in terms of qualified condemnation. But I have often felt inclined to believe in my own heart that he followed it to the letter. And it is most certainly the accepted creed at Trouville.

Of course we soon made acquaintance.

It would have been almost impossible at the Hôtel de Paris to avoid doing so. One was a lively young American from Chicago, a Mr. Harris, with a still more lively wife, who apologised for her idioms on the ground that nobody in the States ever dreamed of talking English except a few stuck-up Yankees from "Borston."

There was an English clergyman in the hotel, with his wife and family, and by permission of the authorities he posted a notice in the *salon* to the effect: "On Sunday morning (D.V.) the Reverend George Pontifex will celebrate divine service in the reading-room for members of the English Church, at 11 a.m."

No sooner did Mr. Harris observe this announcement than he took counsel with his wife, and posted up under it another to this effect: "And at the same hour John P.

Harris, of Chicago, U.S., will (D.V.) be found in the billiard-room to play any gentleman his own game, from fifty to five hundred up, for the tables and drinks."

The Harris's were as happy and radiant as children, and Mrs. Harris frankly owned to me that, Saratoga always excepted, Trouville, in her opinion, whipped creation.

"Saratoga, madam," she said, "is a place of its own. If you doubt it, go to the Assembly Rooms, and there you'll see with your own eyes the hub of the universe sticking up through the floor."

My income, of course, allowed me little luxuries beyond the average limit of comforts. I set up a small victoria of my own; with a presentable coachman; I invested in a Maltese poodle, and at the races at Deauville I think I wore as pretty a frock (a creation of Pingat's) as any woman in the

enclosure, although princesses and cocottes were vieing with each other; and, better still, I was *en veine*, or rather Mr. Harris was *en veine* for me, for I remember that I won every day and on nearly every race, and, at the conclusion of the "reunion," was considerably over three hundred louis to the good.

Mrs. Fortescue, who, instead of plunging, invested judiciously, had also no reason to complain. She pursued the time-honoured method of invariably backing the favourite, and, as she owned to us very candidly, actually managed to double her modest little capital, which she had fixed at the limit of five hundred francs.

We were consequently all of us on the best of possible terms with ourselves, with one another, and—parsons excepted—with the world at large.

Before the race-meeting was over I had become very intimate with the Harris's, and we had almost settled that, when they returned to the States, Ethel and I should accompany them, and be initiated into the various pleasures of New York life.

I may mention that I was still passing as Mrs. Gascoigne. I had got used to the name and liked it; and I had, moreover, by this time entirely lost all nervousness. I believe, indeed, that if my father and Sir Henry had turned up together arm-in-arm my composure would have been in no way disturbed, however much such an unholy coalition might have surprised and amused me.

Ethel and I exchanged notes one evening, and found ourselves agreed that we were both not only feeling but looking distinctly

better and brighter than when we first left England.

“And for a very good reason, my child,” said Ethel; “from morning to night we have literally nothing to worry or annoy us. The secret of health is happiness. The secret of happiness is to have nothing whatever to trouble you. The key of that secret lies in a regular income, which you must not exceed, and for which you have not to work. Of course you can abuse the gifts of the gods.

With your regular income, and nothing to do, you can lie in bed all day, or you can worry yourself about things which are really no concern of your own, and only mix you up in petty squabbles with other people, or you can take up some hobby, such as hydropathy, or a new and fashionable

form of belief or of unbelief, and make yourself a nuisance to your friends over it. *Surtout point de zèle.* But avoid these stumbling-blocks, and—and, well! there you are. It is perfect nonsense to say that those whom the gods love die young. Those whom the gods love live on to a most respectable old age, and die immensely esteemed and lamented, as of course you and I shall do; and very often 'cut up' exceedingly well into the bargain.

"What was it a very famous Dean—not of Salchester or of Southwick, but of Christchurch—once said? 'Religion,' he profoundly observed, 'not only ensures us salvation in the next world, but also not infrequently leads to considerable honours and emoluments in this.' I am afraid, my dear, your father is not sufficiently religious ever to be a bishop."

“ You are incorrigible,” I replied ; “ and almost provoke me to treat you as a child and slap you soundly.”

After which terrible threat we sallied out, the best of friends, in quest of ices.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME few days later we made more new acquaintances. How we first came to speaking at all, and how from that we got on to what are called speaking terms, and so on to better terms still, I do not exactly recollect.

In one of Thackeray's ballads, the widowed landlady describes how

She herself had lived in
Many years of union sweet,
With a gent she met promiskous,
Walking in the public street.

Ethel and I met the Fox's somewhere or

other. I think it was in the Casino, and we somehow gravitated towards one another.

It is my own private opinion that Fox *père* was something in some big way in the City—a stockbroker, or an underwriter, or a drysalter, or a wharfinger, or a member of the Corn Exchange. He was pronouncedly *bourgeois*, and very sensibly made no attempt to conceal the fact. His wife pleased me less. I must frankly own that I could not take kindly to her. She was one of the many daughters of an English Earl with a sufficiently good and old title, and a yearly improving income.

An Earl of Wallingford, in the days of the Regency, had got most disastrously into debt, and had sold his life interest in the family estates for a mere song to the Jews. When he died, the new heir, who was equally extravagant, found that, after heavily insuring

his life, and taking up all the *post obit* bonds which he had given, he had about six or seven hundred a year of his own upon which to live. He went and fluttered about with it at Schlossbad-on-the-Rhine, where he one night tumbled down the stairs of the Kursaal and broke his neck.

The next successor was a cousin—a small country clergyman somewhere down in Somersetshire, of whom, until he one day suddenly found himself Earl of Wallingford, no one had ever heard a word more than had been known of the Vicar of Ossulston, until that learned and exemplary man became a Dean.

He was, however, a very respectable good sort of a country clergyman, and finding himself unexpectedly a peer, he ran up to town and consulted some old college friends as to what on earth he was to do, and to express to them over a bottle of port at the

“Oxford and Cambridge” his intense regret that he could not commute his peerage for a few thousands down or a good canonry.

When, however, he came to look into things, he found that he was not so badly off as he had expected. It is true that every acre had been sold that could by any possibility be got at, and that the encumbrances were something appalling. But when things had been thoroughly looked into by the eminent firm of Snayle, Crawle, Dodger, and Slug, of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, it was discovered that a good deal still remained to be pulled out of the fire. Agricultural depreciation was no doubt one factor in the case; but so, too, had been urban extension, and a considerable amount of land round about Shepherd’s Bush and Uxbridge and other such places was found to be available for building purposes at an immediate profit.

Thus, then, the present Lord Wallingford was far richer than many peers who held their estates uninterruptedly from the days of the Tudors or even the Plantagenets.

Lord Wallingford's third daughter, Lady Aletheia Letitia Sophonisba Langley—who was considered a beauty, and whose claim to the distinction lay chiefly in the fact that her portrait by the President of the Royal Academy, who had been pleased to take a fancy to her and to paint her in consequence, found itself hung one fine May morning in one of the best positions at Burlington House—was a sufficiently good-looking, good-natured schoolgirl, being, indeed, except for her kindness, an immense bundle of the most negative attributes in the world.

Shakespeare has no heroine at all like her. If, looking back at her now, she re-

minds me of any one, it is of Amelia Sedley in "Vanity Fair."

In virtue of her beauty, rather than of any dowry out of the family estates, she had married, or, as the *Tulse Hill Guardian and Streatham Sentinel* put it, "been led to the hymeneal altar" by Mr. Joseph Grogan Fox, a gentleman well known in the City, with a big house at Streatham called Arbutus Lodge, another big house in Berkshire called—Heaven alone knows why—The Uplands, and a marine villa at Eastbourne.

He was a big man with a red face. His enemies and his rivals in the City, called him pompous and vulgar. His friends admitted him to be fussy and dictatorial, adding, by way of qualification, that he was warm-hearted. He knew the

course of the markets thoroughly. On all other questions whatever he devoutly adopted his views from those of the inner page of the *Times*, which he regarded by reverential awe as being the nearest approach to direct inspiration vouchsafed us in these irreligious and degenerate days.

When he went to his bankers he was always ushered directly into the partner's private room, and I believe that he valued this outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace more than any other earthly honour. At least that was my impression, judging from the number of times he informed me of this important fact.

With all his oddities and even failings he was a well-meaning man, and, according to his own lights, fairly good-natured and just.

Our friendship ripened rapidly. I did not flirt with my worthy City merchant. In the first place I really respected him too much, and in the second place the very idea of anything of the sort would have been ridiculous in itself. But I did all that I could to make myself agreeable to him without in any way arousing the jealousy of his wife, and I think I may claim that I fairly succeeded.

He talked about me and wearied other people; and he talked to me, and I am bound to say wearied me. He complimented me (guardedly) upon my personal appearance, and unreservedly upon what he was pleased to term, with something of the air of a valuer and appraiser, my "accomplishments." I, of course, fooled him to the top of his bent, even venturing so far towards the extreme limit

of mendacity as to felicitate him on his markedly Parisian accent.

When he had swallowed this, I knew that he would swallow anything, and I administered my *persiflage* in even larger doses. The game being thus entirely in my own hands, I managed to have dealt to me the very card for which I had all along been manœuvring, and secured a definite invitation to take up my quarters for a week or two at The Uplands on the first possible opportunity for myself after the return of its occupants.

“If I were you, dear Mirian,” said Ethel, “I would go down there and have a look all round at these City men. Do not be so foolish as to marry one of them, for Heaven’s sake. But if you find one among them who is at all presentable, toss him over to me. I will marry him

at once, subject always to appropriate settlements. And I will then either make him or break him as the fancy may take me, or as he himself may turn out to incite either my contempt or my regard."

It was impossible to argue with her when she was in this mood. And, after all, it is not unpleasant now and again in this life to float down the stream. So I ended by a distinct promise that I would visit the Fox's in October, and it was further arranged between the high contracting powers that, as a matter of course, Mrs. Fortescue was to come with me.

Then the Fox's left Trouville for home, and, as the place was emptying, Ethel and I took Paris in our way homeward, staying of course in her little *entresol* in

the Rue Royale, and enjoying ourselves in our own way, but most harmlessly and decorously withal.

Finding ourselves in Paris it followed almost necessarily, from the new association of ideas, that we should one day fall to talking about Prince Balanikoff. Ethel returned to the charge vigorously. I had been very foolish in the matter, she said ; and she had told me so all along, and she thought so still.

The Prince had acted most honourably, and had told no lies whatever. There could not be a doubt that he had throughout spoken the entire truth, and was devotedly attached to me. He had thoroughly proved himself a gentleman by refraining from giving me the least trouble or annoyance when we met at Monte Carlo. Thus Mrs. Fortescue.

“A Russian gentleman,” she added,

"when he is a gentleman, is without his equal; and I can only say that life is far too short to warrant any of us in throwing away so splendid a certainty as that which you are recklessly tossing aside. If poor Sabine were alive, it would be quite another matter. I should be the last to urge the cause of the Prince, or, for the matter of that, of the great White Czar himself. No woman in her life ever really loves more than one man. But we are dealing now with facts, and not with the strong rich wine of the first and last love. Look at the facts, Miriam, and your sound common-sense will show you that my own view of the case is the correct one, the most sensible, and, in every way, the best."

Instead of arguing the matter with her, to which I did not feel at all equal, I suggested a drive. We visited the *laiterie* in

the Bois, and got out and sauntered for a while in the neighbourhood of the cascade. Then we drove pleasantly back to the Rue Royale. Ethel mounted the stairs, and hurried to the balcony.

“It’s a sin to stop in,” she said, “on this glorious day, and to sit here tiring one another. Let us turn out again ; dine in the open, anywhere you please—in the Champs Élysées, I vote—and then go to the Hippodrome. The divine spirit of youth is upon me once again, and I want to see the horse-riders. Yes, we will go to the Hippodrome.”

Of course she had her way. We dined pleasantly enough together, and, not lingering as men do over our wine, found ourselves esconced in a comfortable *loge* at the Hippodrome, and neither too late nor too early for the best part of the performance.

The old King of Hanover's immense barouche had just driven into the arena and deposited Mdlle. Celestine, the Amazonian Queen of the Electric Wire; and we were critically contemplating that lady's massive proportions and masculine muscles, when Ethel touched my elbow, and whispered : "Look at her, my dear. Keep your eyes on her. Prince Balanikoff is here, with his glasses levelled dead at us. He will be round in a minute, and, of course, we must be properly surprised."

CHAPTER VII.

As Ethel had predicted, within a very few seconds Prince Balanikoff was at the door of our box, looking for permission to come, as a mere matter of form, before lifting the latch.

Of course, I bowed graciously, and motioned to him to enter; and equally, of course, he was in a moment at my side.

I wonder why it is that Russians, who are often but imperfectly educated, except in geography, and the art of speaking every language under the sun with the fluency of a Mezzofanti, have yet, as a rule, such

very good taste. Let us admit that a Russian gentleman, or, to be more exact, a Russian nobleman (for in Russia there are no gentlemen, in our English sense of the term) is only veneered; that his polish is superficial; and that he is at heart and by instinct always more or less a savage. He yet has many most admirable qualities—virtues they can hardly be termed—which not a few English gentlemen would do well to observe, and, if possible, to imitate.

He is undoubtedly brave. Russian officers, whether in the army or the navy, are fine fellows, contrasting very favourably, as a rule, with their French, and even their English brothers-in-arms. The Austrians come the nearest to them. Then, too, every Russian gentleman is a born courtier and diplomatist. An Englishman is most certainly neither the one nor the other.

Look at Russia, indeed, from whatever point of view you may, she is a mystery; and it is certain that the world will one day be either Russian or Anglo-Saxon—unless, as some Zadkiels predict, the Chinese are to come down upon us in their myriads, as the Goths and Vandals came down upon Imperial Rome, and trample all Western civilisation under their feet. Perhaps we should be the better able to solve the problem could we read that marvellous State paper, said to be still jealously preserved in the Kremlin, the will of Peter the Great.

On the walls of the Deptford cattle market can to-day be seen a stone tablet. It marks the spot near which Peter worked, drank brandy by the pint, and smoked the coarsest tobacco, holding his own amongst the very roughest of his fellow labourers by his immense physical strength, and his re-

markable promptitude in bringing it to bear when he found argument tedious or unprofitable.

“I hardly expected, Lady Craven,” the Prince said, “to find you and Mrs. Fortescue in Paris; and I certainly never dreamed of finding you here of all places in this most charming of cities.”

“It is a harmless place enough,” I replied. “I really have been fond of the circus ever since I was a child. And why should we not be in Paris? Neither Mrs. Fortescue nor I are in any way connected with the illustrious house of Bourbon; nor have we any monarchical sympathies of any sort. If so, we should probably long ago have received a polite intimation from the secret police that the air of the provinces would be no more likely to suit our delicate health than the gaiety and excitement of Paris, with its

perpetual wear and tear. We are here like English country children at an English fair, simply intent on amusing ourselves, which we have as good a right to do as any one else. I always did like Paris, Prince, and I believe I always shall. And beyond this explanation, whatever it may be worth, I have really none other to offer you."

"The explanation is perfect," said he. "It is, in fact, in the best style of diplomacy, which I have heard described as the *art de dénier ce qui est et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas*. I needed no explanation, however, and should be unreasonable if I expected one. Upon my word of honour, I cannot give you the least idea why I am here myself. You, my dear Lady Craven, Mrs. Fortescue, and I, are, at this moment, a most happy illustration of that fortuitous concourse of atoms out of which,

according to philosophers, this very best of all possible worlds of ours originally arose."

Of course, he was lying desperately. Equally, of course, I knew he was lying. Equally, of course, again, he knew that I knew that he knew it. And this mutual appreciation of the situation made things at once easy and pleasant.

"As, however," remarked Mrs. Fortescue, "chance has been kind enough to throw us all together here at the Hippodrome, it is perhaps only fair to let you know that Lady Craven is staying with me, and that we shall both be delighted to see you at breakfast to-morrow morning. Will a late twelve suit you?"

"If I had an engagement at that time with Prince Zuroff himself," he replied, "I should break it unhesitatingly. Look! that

marvellously constructed mass of muscle, Leona Dare, is about to hang with her head down, and swing a man backwards and forwards from between her teeth. I sometimes wonder whether she is really a woman at all. If not, she, or rather he, keeps the secret very cleverly."

And then Leona Dare, defying the scrutiny of the whole amphitheatre, flew up her ladder, swung her man from between her teeth, and came down again to acknowledge, with bows to right and left, a thunder of plaudits, and a tempest of bouquets. She had been the *pièce de résistance* of the performance, and almost immediately Ethel and I ~~use~~ to go. The Prince saw us, of course, to the door, assisted us into our *coupé*, and we were soon back at the Rue Royale.

"He is a bad, bold man, my dear,"

said Ethel Fortescue, "a very bad, bold man indeed, and, of course, you must be on your most particular guard against him; otherwise, he is no doubt as rich as an Esterhazy or a Batthyany. But then you are never safe with these Russians. Their wealth is always in mines and forests. The Great White Czar, their father, who has his eye upon them all, can confiscate it at any moment. That is why they carry about with them so much of their treasure in the shape of jewels above price, and always have a big account in Paris or in London, or anywhere but in Russia, to which they religiously transfer every rouble that they do not spend. In whatever else a Russian Prince may be wanting, he is most certainly never short of ready money. And many of them are much richer than the Czar himself, for that unlucky man—so every-

body says—is robbed through thick and thin, and is very often really hard up. It may sound ridiculous, but I none the less believe it to be a fact."

Prince Balanikoff, I need scarcely say, came to breakfast, and did nothing but talk about England, and declare that he had half a mind to live there. The more he saw of the English, the better he got to understand them and to like them. It was a mistake into which foreigners only too easily fell, to assume roughly that the English were all churlish, and difficult to get on with. It was nothing of the sort. All that you needed to do, was to take them in the right way, which meant, of course, to flatter their vanity and play upon their foibles, and they were the

easiest people to manage in the world. That the men were brave no one had ever doubted, although they laboured under the delusion that bravery was a virtue of which the Anglo-Saxon race had a monopoly. Before the Crimean war, they were under the delusion that Russians could not fight. They had actually forgotten how Napoleon himself found the Russian rank and file more than a match for his picked battalions.

But if Englishmen had their faults as well as their virtues, Englishwomen, at any rate—as he had already told me at Monte Carlo—were perfect, and, in fact, beyond all praise; for they were the truest type of womanhood—gentle, faithful, affectionate, moral wives, model mothers, and with a gaiety which was not like that of their French sisters on the other side of the

Channel, forced, but as genuine as the sparkle of a diamond, or the still more matchless hue of a dew-drop in the morning sun.

It would be difficult for me to exactly describe how all this hyperbole affected me. It reminded me vaguely of Mr. Trumbull, the auctioneer in George Eliot's "*Middle-march*," of whom the covetous, crafty, and suspicious Mr. Featherstone remarks that, "Trumbull is an auctioneer, and he speaks fine," at once adding judicially, "not but what Trumbull has made money."

The Prince was a Russian, and no doubt "spoke fine," or, to be more exact, was a most abominable liar. But that he had made money, or had, at all events, somehow got the control and command of it, was beyond all question; and it was money, after all, or, rather, what money could give me, that was the only thing now left for

me in a world, the rules of which, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, alter not.

But there was one good influence that kept me back, when I might otherwise have been weak enough to give way. It was the memory of George Sabine, with whom, as with a touchstone, it had long been my habit to test in my own mind every man across whom I came.

How little the world, as it calls itself, knows of the truth! The very man to whom, if the world was to be believed, I owed my ruin, was the one the mere memory of whom kept me from evil, against which I might otherwise have been weak and powerless.

Before very long the inevitable, exactly as I had foreseen it, actually falsified the reputation it has of late years acquired, and came to pass most naturally.

The Prince began to say that he feared he was like all his countrymen, little better than an immense schoolboy (at this period Ethel, with a deprecatory murmur, was wicked enough to leave the room;) that it was idle to attempt to conceal the fact from himself, and that he was sure he could not possibly hope for a moment to conceal it from me. He knew perfectly well that he was risking my very gravest displeasure, and risking it most unwarrantably. I should be most entirely justified if I were to forbid him ever to speak to me again; but he could only throw himself upon my mercy. He never wished again to set foot in Russia. Out of that country he could defy the Czar himself. His Imperial Majesty would utter terrible threats, no doubt, but threatened men lead proverbially long lives, and he had for himself no reason to fear that he should form

any exception whatever to this most pleasant and wholesome rule—a rule of which all despots were perfectly well aware, and upon which they habitually acted. Whatever articulate expression the anger of the Czar might take, he had long ago made up his mind to leave the country, and, in fact, had made all his preparations for doing so. He would be safer perhaps in the United States than anywhere else, for, although the relations between Washington and the Imperial Chancellerie were very cordial, the United States had always most sternly refused to regard political offences as matters of extradition.

For himself, however, he did not care where he went, and would leave the choice entirely to me. All he had to do was to beg me to reconsider my decision. And then he fairly, and without the least dissimulation, lost all control over himself, and

urged his affection with a vehemence that almost terrified me by its obvious and painful sincerity.

Here, at all events, there was no acting or pretence. The man was savagely in earnest, and his wild and ungovernable temper was something more than dangerous, it was absolutely terrible.

I did all that I could to quiet him, and, to put the matter as bluntly as possible, to get rid of him. I told him with all the plainness that truth has, when you can bring yourself to speak it out courageously, that I had really loved but one man in my life, and should most certainly never love another ; adding, with scarcely equal veracity, that I meant to treasure that man's memory, and to live faithfully as his widow to the day of my death ; that I had vowed as much and dared not break my vow ; that, if I did, the vengeance

of Heaven would most certainly overtake me ; and then, having no other arguments left that occurred to me as at all likely to be of any avail with him, I burst into a passion of tears, which were as genuine as any I had ever shed, and begged him to show a little mercy, and to leave me at once.

Some men when they are in a rage turn pale and tremble ; in others, the blood rushes to their head until the veins stand out on their temples like knotted whipecord. Prince Balanikoff's fury took neither of these shapes. Externally he was as calm, probably more calm, than if he had been taking his brigade into action. But that he was beside himself with passion, and that the Cossack element in him had entirely got the upper hand was evident. It would have been idle for him to attempt to conceal the fact.

“You wield an authority,” he said, “more potent over me than that of his Imperial Majesty himself. If I disobey him he can kill me, and were he to set himself to work about the task in anything like earnest would no doubt succeed in it. Well, you can only kill a man once. I have seen men shot. I once saw a wretch of a Pole knouted to death. It was not exactly a pleasant sight; but it was interesting, and I admired his courage. To use your English ideas, he died game. I think—in fact I am sure—I could do the same myself. But you are condemning me even to a death in life far more terrible than any death, more terrible and more hopeless than even the deepest and darkest Siberian mines in which we leave our worst malefactors to rot. I hardly deserve this of you, nor is it merciful or like

yourself. And yet I cannot see what I am to do or to say. I suppose I must accept my fate. My life has never been a bright or a very happy one. I must live it out for as long as the gods may please, and must endeavour when I feel most miserable to think of you."

He bowed and looked at me. I held out my hand, and, with all his own native tact, he grasped it and shook it heartily, but tenderly, in the truest and simplest English fashion, and so went his way.

For the very soul of me I was sorry for the man. And yet I could not see at that moment, at any rate, how I could possibly have acted otherwise or have said or left unsaid a single word.

CHAPTER VIII.

I STAYED in Paris for a few days longer, out of mere indolence. There are certain places in the world which tempt you to remain in them. The effort to leave them is as great as that required on a cold frosty morning to virtuously jump out of your comfortable bed and plunge into cold water.

For my own part, I cannot believe that Providence intended the world to be unhappy for us. And here let me briefly give my own idea of what the world ought

to be. It is the world of which George Sabine spoke to me. It is a world within easy reach of London. It is a world where nobody gives you any worry or bother, and where you on your own part are equally cautious and discreet. There is no post-office, there are no daily papers, there are no fashions, there are no lions to expect to be fêted, there is no Opera-house, there is no circulating library. But, for the benefit of men, who are always selfish, there are clubs, and music-halls. These are frequented by the men alone. No woman would willingly stay in them for a minute, or visit them a second time.

I continued to think of this world vaguely and indefinitely. There are pitiful sights in London. It is sad to see a wretched little street Arab staring through

the area railings at the dinner which is hopelessly beyond his reach. As the world grows older it grows harder, and friendship and affection, whatever they may be worth, are figures in the sand which the next tide will wash away.

Man assumes that the world is made for himself. Behind him are the cliffs. In front of him is the sea. His narrow tether is the little strip of sand. His view being limited to this limited area, every man becomes more or less a Sir Henry Craven, fancying that the rocks and the tides are his own. I do not believe that the world will ever come right until men lay aside egotism and contentedly take their proper place in that great order of things, the future of which is as absolutely unknown to us as the beginning. What

does Swinburne say in his "Atalanta in Calydon?"

His life is a dream and a vision,
Betwixt a sleep and a sleep.

Ethel was delighted at the mere idea of a change. A genuine English country house, like that of the Fox's, opened up unknown possibilities to her. I need scarcely say that I knew the English country house only too well. There are the hot-houses, the kitchen-garden, the stables, and, perhaps, the home farm. Country houses resemble each other as do mountain peaks, or milestones, or telegraph-posts, or daisies on the lawn which is spread in their front. How ridiculous it is in these days to talk of going into the country for a change!

A railway takes you to the summit of the Rigi, and you are offered a brandy and soda. You reach the apex of the Great Pyramid, having been hoisted up by attendant Arabs, and you find Bass's bottled ale, with a red pyramid on the label, Watling's pork pies, and Blandy's Madeira.

Were we to-morrow to discover the exact site of Eden so satisfactorily that not a single gentleman in the British Museum—where there are any number of gentlemen very learned, with nothing to do, and with small salaries for doing it—could possibly contradict, it is pretty certain that within a fortnight a restaurant would be put up at the place, and that the adjacent walls and posts would be smothered with announcements of Eno's Fruit Salt, prepared from apples, warranted to be of the genuine Eden brand.

At the beginning of October we found ourselves at The Uplands. It was one of those English country houses for which a Parisian banker would give at any minute a dozen *chateaux*. It was an ugly old building, to which storey after storey, room after room, and wing after wing, had been added, with no regard whatever to the inexorable requirements of architecture, but simply according to the immediate necessities of the moment.

Behind the house itself plantations of Norway pine stretched up to the turnpike road. From the front of the house down to the river ran a wilderness of lawn, with red geranium and gaudy heliotrope. Then a carpet of turf, as smooth as a billiard-table, brought you to the river's edge, where there were boats and punts, and where, under the shelter of her own house

lay the little steam-launch, which was always ready to start, and to make any number of miles in the hour. And from the bank, if you were so disposed, you could catch perch, or gudgeon, or eels, to your heart's content; while in the big eddies lay antediluvian trout, proof against any snare, and contemptuous of their riparian owners.

Take the whole world as it spins round upon its axis, and in autumn a well-appointed house in the Thames Valley is the half-way house between this world and Paradise.

We were welcomed with the utmost cordiality. Whatever London may be, there is, at all events, little constraint in an English country house within the London radius. Ethel and I were at home at once. It was, of course, the usual country house business. The foot-and-mouth disease had broken out

in the neighbourhood. There was a terrible report to the effect that the curate of the parish, who had a lovely tenor voice, and had taken a double third at Oxford, was about to marry the barmaid at the "Yellow Dragon." No doubt her father was a very solvent farmer in the neighbourhood—who would probably, I thought, object to the match—and she herself was a very well-behaved young woman, although she had somewhat forgotten her position by going to church in a sealskin mantle, which was, to say the least, unbecoming her position. The curate had, however, come into money—a thousand pounds, at the least. It would pay all his college debts; and he would, no doubt, under the circumstances, marry well, and forget Miss Bird, although his opinions were somewhat heterodox. People said that he had a leaning towards Rome.

The gipsies had been very troublesome in the neighbourhood of late, and the tramps and beggars in the road were something terrible. It was utterly impossible, nowadays, to get eligible young men to spend a quiet week or two in a country house. The moment the London season was over they went on the Continent, wasting their money and ruining their health.

This was the kind of thing to which I had to listen, and I took my part in it with a grave silence and an occasional nod of the head that was intended to speak as it might be interpreted, but was taken as expressing unlimited assent and approval.

The men staying at The Uplands were pleasant enough. With the women I somehow could not get on. Perhaps there were faults on both sides—the faults being mainly

jealousy and suspicion on their side. For I can declare most truthfully, as far as I was concerned, that I was entirely innocent of intention to give or willingness to take offence.

They were annoyed by a number of things: by my manner, which was certainly not theirs; by my toilette, which certainly differed from theirs; by my self-possession and reticence, and unwillingness to be pumped or to join in idle gossip for its own sake. We had, to sum up the position, no common interests. And I may fairly say, and without any conceit, that I felt myself very much like the ugly duckling in the wonderful story of Hans Andersen.

Ethel Fortescue, on the other hand, got on with these women admirably. I asked her one evening, when we were sitting chatting

in my room just before going to bed, how she managed to so adapt herself to circumstances.

“My dear Miriam,” she replied, “I am past the age of illusions. I do not expect people to be either better or worse than I find them. If we do not quarrel, I am quite content. That is a negative result, no doubt; but then life is negative from beginning to end. I wonder whether, when the animals went into the ark with Noah, a couple of snails formed part of the procession. If so, I may, by all the logic of Darwin, be descended from them. The snail asks no questions. The snail is partial to the good things of this world, with a peculiar penchant for strawberries. The snail carries his own house about with him. In all these respects he has a distinct advantage. Also he keeps his own counsel. For, in the whole of

Æsop, you will not find a snail taking a human being into his confidence. If the snail is not lovely and beautiful in his life, he at any rate has a good time of it; and if you keep him in a cellar, and feed him on lettuce leaves, he is far preferable to the best Whitstable oyster that was ever dredged. What a world of humbug this is! We all know the lovely little elegy on the robin redbreast—

No more in lone and leafless groves
With ruffled wing and faded breast.

I forget most of the rest, but I know it ends with—

Gone to the land where birds are blest.

*

That is my land, Miriam. Why on earth do you not make it yours? How old am I? Just as old as I feel, and ten years younger than I look. I have made my book

on that principle. As for the stakes, I am utterly indifferent to them. We should all live for ever if men did not drink themselves to death, and women did not worry themselves to death."

"I have no desire to live for ever," I replied.

"Neither have I. The very idea is tedious. But no power on earth, above it, or below it, shall make me abbreviate my life by worry."

The people in the house were, to use the ordinary phrase, mixed.

"How do you like Cowes, Mr. Snip?" once asked a Prince of the Blood Royal to a most eminent Sackville Street tailor.

"Very well, your Royal Highness," was the answer; "but I find the company a little mixed."

"Bless my soul, Mr. Snip!" the Prince

answered, "did you come down here and expect to find us all tailors?"

Well, the society at The Uplands was, no doubt, a little mixed, but it did not entirely consist of City people. On the contrary, it was almost as varied as are the hues in a kaleidoscope.

There are two kinds of rich men. Some have immense wealth, but not much ready money. Others have moderate wealth, and, within reasonable limits, any amount of ready money. These are the men who are able at any moment to write a cheque in four figures without much anxiety, although a war, or an unexpected turn of the markets may ruin them, and sometimes does. But, as a rule, they are very seldom so ruined, and, upon the whole, have a happy time of it. Dividends and coupons are far more easily to be collected than

is rent. And these two kinds of men were well represented at The Uplands.

The lawn was nearly full. I can only pick the prominent guests. There was a London Rector, with his wife and eldest daughter. His parish was in the City, and he had only ten parishioners. He drew two thousand a year, paid two hundred to a curate, was chaplain to four or five City companies, and preached at White-hall upon occasions. But he was a good man, charitable to a fault, and thoroughly sincere.

There was a West-end doctor with an enormous practice. His speciality was latent consumption. You might not have got consumption at present, but he could stake his professional reputation that you would be an incurable victim to it within six months unless you took his advice—his

advice being, that you should go to Mentone, stop there as long as you liked, and come and see him again upon your return.

There was the editor of the *Comet*, a weekly sixpenny paper to which all the talents contributed, and which crowed each Saturday as loudly as the cock in Noah's Ark would have done, if that patriarch had been weak enough to allow the bird to perch itself upon the roof for that express purpose.

There was a judge with a reputation for hanging, who, in private life at all events, was as gentle as a Robespierre, and had certain human weaknesses, delighting in milk as a beverage, and having for pastry the appetite of a schoolboy of the times gone by.

You would never have taken him for

what he was; and, indeed, he made it his rôle to pose as a country gentleman in a small way, pretending to be learned about the Colorado beetle, the foot and mouth disease, and the general agricultural outlook. He also talked of hounds as if he were in the habit of riding to them, and would occasionally so far give his imagination stretch, as to indulge us with stories about deer, and salmon, and capercailzie.

What an odd thing it is that really successful and eminent professional men should apparently be as ashamed of their profession, and should take as much pains to hide it as do small suburban tradesmen to hide the fact that they keep a shop!

There was also Lord Robert Fitz-Henry, third brother of the Duke of Berkshire,

with a large income which he entirely devoted to yachting, never setting foot on shore except for a change. He had taken his screw-steamer, the *Miranda*, to Spitzbergen and to Cape Horn, to the Straits of Sunda, and to the Bay of San Francisco. He was unmarried; preternaturally tall; bony and muscular; intensely ugly, and with all the generosity and dash of a sailor just paid off.

Last amongst the company was Lord Ashwell, heir presumptive to the Earldom of Cambridge. He was a mild young man, with more promise in him at present than reality; but of the promise there was abundance. A trainer would probably have described him as a leggy colt. Leggy colts, however, are apt to develop into dark and dangerous horses. I became somehow

interested in Lord Ashwell and took notice of him.

He was close upon six feet, and large limbed. Most women would have called him awkward and uncouth. He had a pink face, red lips, a downy moustache, eyes of gray blue, and a mop of crisp yellow curls. He blushed when you spoke to him. He never seemed to know exactly what to do with his hands, and his powers of conversation were most distinctly limited. He was about four-and-twenty. If you had dressed him in a slouch hat, a smock frock, corduroys and ankle-jacks, it would have been impossible to take him for anything but an agricultural labourer, until he had opened his mouth. Then you would have found that you were dealing with an English gentleman, somewhat diffident, but

more than usually accomplished, and well read.

Somehow or other I took a fancy to this young man. He was in no way whatever like George Sabine. There was not one point in common between the two. And yet neither would have compared disadvantageously with the other, and I am sure that if they had met by any accident, they would have proved firm friends.

It is a fallacy to suppose that men of the right sort must needs resemble each other, as closely as do peas or potatoes, or, for the matter of that, pearls. The merit of a man is his individuality. The more he is unlike other men the better, as a rule, will it be worth your while to cultivate him.

About stupid people and wicked people there is a very dreary monotony. Rogues are so like each other that a detective with any experience can single out a pick-pocket in the midst of a crowd.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE day at a country house is for all the world like another. There is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Every well appointed country house has, or ought to have, its sun-dial ; and the life of the house is that of the dial. At the exact hour it tells the exact time. You know what everybody is doing, you know where they are, and you know where to find them. It is as much matter of entire certainty as is life on board an ocean liner. This particular man will be for a certainty at the kennels, or the stables, or in the billiard-room ; this

or that particular lady with or without the particular man, whom she may affect, will be in the shrubberies, or at the home farm.

One man is a certain find at a given hour in the library. You may make sure of another whom you will discover under the big cedar on the lawn fast asleep with a book which he has only just begun to cut and has most certainly not commenced to read.

My own place in the morning was the campshead where there was a large marquee in case of rain, with every luxury inside it, down even to an inner room or *tabernaculum* for ladies. Should it rain you might safely trust to the great firm of Edgington to protect you against the weather. Should it be fine there were rustic seats outside. And, for those who liked the sport,

there was any store of gudgeon tackle, with bait. Anglers, who are genuine anglers and love their sport, will tell you that, next to salmon-fishing, the capture of the little gudgeon is the perfection of Walton's craft.

I was seated one morning very pleasantly under the awning of the marquee. October in the valley of the Thames is often the most delightful month in the year. In September it rains. In October there is an equipoise. It is not till November that you get what sailors call dirty weather. The woods and plantations are turning a rich russet—a dull, pleasant colour upon which it does the eye good to rest. Practically, and as a matter of fact, it is the exact tint of stewed Normandy pippins. But are not primroses the very colour of flowers of sulphur? And does not the mere

mention of flowers of sulphur recall the memory of Mrs. Wackford Squeers and the brimstone and treacle ?

It is a strange fact but a true one, that, at the most critical moments of your life, the memories and recollections that crop up and force themselves upon you are the most incongruous.

Lord Ashwell came sauntering up, apparently unprepared. As a matter of fact, I could see at once that he was dressed for the occasion. He wore the I Zingari uniform, which in its way is as much a distinction as is the uniform of the Royal Yacht Squadron. He had then, so to say, hoisted his colours, treble-shotted his guns, and was now sailing down under full topsails, conquering and to conquer. Once again ! What a contrast to George Sabine !

“ It is a surprise to find you here, Mrs.

Gascoigne," he said (what very unskilful liars men are). "I strolled down intending to be alone, and here I find you."

"Then," said I, "it would be cruel in me to disappoint so laudable an intention. I was just about to return to the house, and I will so leave you to your solitude and its valuable results."

He turned as red as a turkey cock, and, like that ridiculous bird, began to gobble or gabble—I wonder which is the correct etymology—in an incoherent fashion.

"This is a beastly dull place," he said. "Of course there are such things as white lies. There's no harm in a white lie. Very much the contrary. It does you good, and it saves a lot of trouble, especially for a fellow like myself, who hasn't got the gift of the gab. 'Gift of the gab,' is beastly vulgar I know, but it is just what I mean.

If I only had the gift of the gab like my beast of a younger brother has, I should be sitting for the county now. I know what I mean as well as any man, but I can't bring it out."

"I think I know what you mean," I answered, "and I think—I am sure you will understand me—that I can help a lame dog over a stile. You are very kind, and you have come down here to talk to me because I am alone. Now, as it happens, I came down here myself because *I* wanted to be alone, and as that is so, I am sure you can easily find or invent something else to do. A man in the country has every advantage over a woman. There is always some amusing occupation to which he can turn. A woman has literally nothing. I am at this moment engaged in doing nothing. It is a delightful pursuit, and I shall be very grateful to

you if you will let me continue it uninterrupted."

He was no match for me. Look what a training I had had. Again he flushed from white to red, and then paled from red to white, and then began to stammer and stutter inarticulately.

" You are too clever for me," he said. " You are laughing at me, and twisting me round your little finger. You are as merciless as the famous tennis player who gives you half-forty with a bisque, and as he steps into the service side, asks you which is your favourite chase. What on earth is the good of torturing me? I know what I mean, and you know what I mean. It's cruelty to animals to worry me in this way. I can stand a facer as well as any man. If one is to come, do pray for goodness sake let me have it and have done with it."

“ You are talking in parables,” I replied. “ I assure you I have not the least idea of what you mean.”

“ You must have,” he answered. “ What I mean is that I love you, that I would be shot for you, or die for you in any way, or do anything for you. Surely you know what that means. And surely you can give me a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ to it. Yes or no is not a very difficult matter. I know how to take an answer. Surely it is best to have matters like this out at once, straight and sharp, without any beating about the bush. If you mean fighting it is silly to waste time over sparring for an opening. If I were to talk for a month I couldn’t say any more.”

“ But there is no occasion whatever for you to talk for a month,” I answered, “ unless

you have some very important reasons of your own for doing so. I am sure we quite understand one another. You have paid me the greatest compliment a man can pay a woman; I am very grateful to you for it. I know you are sincere, but—*après*—the thing is out of the question. Let us remain the very best of friends, Lord Ashwell, and be sure that should you ever need my friendship you will have it to the utmost."

He answered discontentedly, and in vernacular, grumpily. "That is just what people always say, 'Let us be friends.' I hate the very sound of the word. Of course friendship is well enough in its own way. It's a very good thing, no doubt; but I don't want your friendship. I am not asking for it. I am asking for something which I value a good deal more, and which

you must know perfectly well I value a good deal more."

"Then," said I, "you want more than I can give you. I cannot give what I have not got. I like you very much. I will tell you frankly that I have done so from the first. You are one of the few gentlemen I have met in my life. It is a rare thing to meet a gentleman, and it is a great pleasure. But it is always best to speak the truth. I do not love you, and I do not think however kind, and true, and loyal you might prove, as I am confident that you would, that I could ever bring myself to love you. My life has been wrecked once, and it would be simply wicked of me even out of mistaken kindness to add another wreck to my own."

He took his answer like a man. He

did not attempt to argue. "Leg-before-wicket," he said, with a cheerful laugh, although a little forced. "Umpire says so, and umpire is always right, or, at all events, there is no appeal. I won't argue, Mrs. Gascoigne. You have been very kind and straightforward and fair. I am quite sure that you have meant to do me a good turn; and if ever I can do you a good turn you may be quite sure that I will. But look here, we needn't draw the stumps yet. On my word of honour, I don't want to worry you. Think it over. We shall have another opportunity of talking about all this; and you may trust me not to vex you unnecessarily, or push myself into your way between now and then. Look, the book is closed for the present; but it isn't locked, and I shall most certainly not give up hope

until you tell me it is locked, and until I am sure that you are doing so in downright earnest."

What on earth is one to do with a boy like this? I know what I should have liked to do, for I felt old enough and fond enough of him, and, for the matter of that, proud enough of him, and proud enough of his love for myself, to seize his head by the curls, and tell him he was a dear good boy—as, indeed, he was—and kiss him as he deserved. But that kind of thing was, of course, out of the question.

"You are very kind," I said; "and I am sure we quite understand each other. In fact, there is next to nothing to understand. The whole thing is far more simple than *Alice in Wonderland*. Each of us has the key to it. We will shut up the

book, as you suggest, for a few days. Days come and go. I will think things over as you have asked me. It is only fair to warn you that I am not likely to change my mind. But then we none of us know anything—not even our own minds. My thoughts come and go like the summer swallows and the snows of winter. Take that as kindly as it is meant."

His answer was terse and to the point. "So I do," he said. "I should be a fool if I didn't, and a very ungrateful fool, too."

And we parted, as I had intended we should, the very best of friends.

If women would only try to make friends of men without making love to them, or allowing love to be made, their lives would be infinitely brighter. The friendship of an

English gentleman is any day worth his love ; and he has no wish to claim a monopoly over your friendship in return. He is a large-hearted creature, simple, generous, loyal, and entirely faithful.

CHAPTER X.

THAT evening, after the ladies had retired. I adjourned to Ethel's room, and we talked over the events of the day. I had no secrets from my friend, and I told her everything.

“ I cannot understand,” she said, “ why you did not accept him then and there. Of course you mean to have him. And, in my opinion, you are unwise in running any risk. These young men never know their own minds. He may be devoted to you to-day, and madly in love with me to-morrow.”

As I looked at Ethel, who, by-the-way, was not at her best *en déshabille*, I felt that, so far as she herself was concerned, my risk was almost infinitesimal.

“Give me a middle-aged man,” she continued. “When *they* love, it *is* love, and no mistake. I hate boys as a rule, but I am bound to admit that your young gentleman is an exception. He will be immensely rich. Old Cambridge owns half the county, and hasn’t a farthing under eighty thousand a year. You had better make hay while the sun shines. Otherwise our young friend will be running up to town and falling in love with some chorus girl, or dancer, or person of that kind who will know how to play her cards. Those kind of women have unbounded experience, and seem to know how to manage these

young men. For my part I cannot understand it. I am told they are very stupid. They are certainly not better looking than we are, nor are they, I believe, a bit more wicked."

"My dear Ethel, I don't care whether he goes to 'town, or whether he doesn't. I don't care if I never set eyes on him again. The fact is I am not a scrap in love with him, and I am more than doubtful whether I shall accept his offer."

"Then I think you're mad. Are you waiting for a Crown Prince to propose to you?"

"I am not waiting for any one to propose. To tell you frankly, I am sick of the whole business. Look at my frightful luck. Nothing succeeds with me. If I were to accept Lord Ashwell, I

should have to tell him the truth. There is no help for that, and even if there were, I should not avail myself of it."

"Of course, you must tell him the truth; but you don't imagine that will make any difference if he is really in love."

"I don't know. Look at Mr. Meadow-sweet."

"There are very few Mr. Meadowsweets about, my dear Miriam. His knowledge of the truth did not diminish Captain Maltby's affection, now did it?"

"No, that is true," I answered; "but I will reply in your own fashion and say that there are very few Captain Maltbys about."

"There I entirely disagree with you. I think that there are a great many. Young men of the present day always want to do something out of the common. A *mariage*

de convenance is the last thing they relish. No; they prefer to elope with a girl without a penny, or to marry an acrobat or a circus-rider, or something of the kind. You and I have never blinked matters. Don't let's do so now. You have been divorced from your husband—most unjustly, as I know; but still you have been divorced. Therefore, in this righteous England of ours, there are scores and scores of parents, who—in reference to yourself—would simply shudder at the idea of an alliance with one of their precious sons, even although the youth in question were steeped in vice. Now, that is precisely the reason why the man himself would be mad to marry you. The very difficulty that his parents make would lend a charm to the whole affair, and throw over it a halo of romance that it would not otherwise possess."

“Perhaps you are right,” I said. “To tell you seriously, my dear Ethel, I have been thinking over my position for myself, and by the light of past events combined with your experience. My divorce was a nine days’ wonder. People are forgetting it already, and will soon have forgotten it altogether; while amongst those who know anything of Sir Henry, and I really also believe amongst those who know myself, there will be a chivalrous and kindly instinct to take my part. Were I to follow Hamlet’s advice and get me to a nunnery, I should be admitting the very worst that has ever been said of me; and that is exactly what I never mean to admit. And, besides, I owe it to George Sabine’s memory quite as much as to myself to show that I treat the whole story as a vile lie.”

“That is exactly what I have been trying to get you to see for months past; and here I am, as I always said I was, a far better diplomatist than that old prig, Sir Henry. For you come to me to-night, dear, to my most infinite satisfaction, to impart to me as a discovery of your own, what I have been all along drilling into you. Of all the dear *ingénues* I ever met, you are the dearest.”

“You are privileged, and you may laugh at me as much as you please. I know that life would be intolerable to you unless you had entire freedom of speech and action. And your life has had so many worries, Ethel, of its own, that it does one good to find it bright again.”

There was something of a glisten in her eye and something of a tremor in her

speech. “I am an old fool,” said she with an affectedly sage nod of her head, “who am masquerading now and again as a girl; but I have a creed of my own. You remember your hypocrite in the *Biglow Papers*, who is most careful to denounce sin in the abstract as being a safe method of self-exultation; but who is especially particular not to denounce sin in the concrete, lest he should be treading on the corns of a neighbour. I hate talking about its being our duty to do good, and to help other people in a general and all round kind of way. But when I find I can do a good turn in particular to anybody in particular, man, woman, or child, then I have a something definite before me, and I can set to work at once. I do not wish to be profane, but what on earth is the

good of praying 'for all sorts and conditions of men.' It's a vague and indefinite kind of prayer, isn't it? It is very seldom that a pious fit comes over me; but, if we are to pray at all, let us ask for something about which there is no mistake. Not that I wish to teach the parsons their business. I am only saying what I feel. 'Laborare est orare.' I know what that means although I don't know Latin, not having had a reverend father to teach it me, as you had. And I know that you can't do work in the abstract, but must always set yourself down to a definite task of some sort or other. And now to be practical myself. I want to see you marry this young fellow, and have done with the thing. You will be in a better position than you are now, although your present position is quite good enough. You

will be revenged upon your old enemies and slanderers, who will come back almost in a deputation headed by your father to beg your high and gracious permission to polish your boots, and, like Raleigh, to put their cloaks upon the ground that you may tread upon them. You will make a very honest young fellow and a good man as happy as he deserves to be, and you will, after all, be only doing common justice to yourself."

"This is a hard saying, dear Ethel; you are offering me new wine to drink. Maybe there is wisdom in the cup. At all events I must drink. I will think as carefully as I can, and I shall be the more disposed to carefulness, because my own wishes and impulses are prompting me at this moment, and for the first time, to act at once upon what you say. Wherefore I move the ad-

journment of the debate, especially as it is high time to get to bed."

"So it is," said Ethel. "Good-night, dearest Miriam," and with that I took up my candlestick and left the room.

CHAPTER XI.

FOUR days later came a big ball, the invitations for which had been sent out, and all the other arrangements made before our arrival. The rooms were, as far as possible, thrown *en suite*, and decorated by an eminent London firm not far from St. Mary Axe. There were immense clumps of exotics, and choice stands of orchids from the neighbourhood of West Kensington. The supper was looked after by a pastrycook in Berkeley Square, whose name is a household word; and the band was simply perfect. I remember that the grounds and shrubberies

and summer houses glistened with many coloured lamps, and here and there were lit up with the electric light, which Mrs. Fortescue declared to be a mixed blessing, pleasant and pretty in itself, but trying to the complexion, and apt at times to burst upon you when you least needed it.

To give a list of the company is out of the question. Half the county were there, from the Lord Lieutenant and the High Sheriff down to the Rectors and small Squires. Arrangements had been made by which a train from Paddington brought down several saloon carriages filled with guests from London, and stopped at Windsor to take in a detachment from the garrison there. Without multiplying details, it can only be said that everything had been admirably planned, and that in no single point did there occur the least breakdown or even delay.

If, as Ethel afterwards said, it had been the old Duke of Buckingham himself entertaining the crowned heads of Europe at Stowe, the thing could not possibly have been better done.

I had what I suppose young girls call a fairly good time of it. I danced as often as I pleased, and more especially walked solemnly through a quadrille with Sir Bridgeman Hale, the distinguished wearer of the ermine, who was staying with the Fox's.

Judges, like most men of any eminence in literature, carefully avoid what schoolboys term the shop. Perhaps they have enough of it during their busy hours. It cannot, of course, be that they are ashamed of it. One can understand a pork jobber or a bill discounter, or even an accountant being reticent as to the exact nature of his

avocation. But why a surgeon should be so, or a civil engineer, or an artist, I altogether fail to understand. *

The judge, however, discoursed with a sort of ponderous encyclopædic knowledge about the latest variety of orchid, the last magazine article that had made any ferment, the French style of acting as compared with our own, and incidentally of the novels of Zola and Daudet, of which he expressed a very strong opinion; while for Gaboriau, on the other hand, he had nothing but praise.

This flood of talk had a curious effect on me and not altogether a pleasant one. He was holding forth to me most distinctly and unmistakably on the assumption that I was an adult woman sufficiently educated and quite capable of following him; and yet, in the very same breath, he was

almost, as it were, lecturing me, as if I were some young lady at Girton being “crammed” against time for my final examination. It was an intellectual shower-bath which I by no means altogether relished.

There are some persons of whom you can only say that, clever as they are and amusing as they may no doubt intend to make themselves, they none the less most distinctly jar upon you. The double bass is a very fine instrument—especially in an orchestra. But it needs a Bottesini to make a solo upon it even tolerable, and Bottesinis are not plentiful.

But the judge had by no means monopolised me; nor, in fact, was he disposed to do so, evidently regarding his conversation as a something which it was his duty, so

far as he could, to distribute impartially, and with as little of favour as of fear.

And thus it came about that before the eventful period of supper I had danced, thoroughly enjoying myself, with a couple of the Windsor contingent; with a clerk from the Foreign Office of whom I was in deadly fear lest he might possibly recognise me, but who was either ignorant or else discreet; with a fashionable novelist; a Royal Academician; a neighbouring baronet; a young Scotch laird who had but just returned from the pursuit of big game in the Corea; and, I ought also to add, three or four times with Lord Ashwell himself. And so the list of what racing men would term my performances stood, when the fortune of the evening gave Lord Ashwell the opportunity of taking me in to supper.

Mr. Calverley, in his clever *Alphabet of the Ball*, has told us how

S was the Supper where all went in pairs,
and how

T was the Twaddle they talked on the stairs.

Lord Ashwell did not talk twaddle either on the stairs, or during supper, but he was evidently filled with the design of talking, and when I declined further galantine, or mayonnaise, or champagne cup, he somehow managed to get me out into the grounds and into a smaller marquee, where refreshments of a somewhat lighter order were being served. To avoid refusing to stop, I allowed him to procure me an ice. He, I noticed, steadied himself with a tumbler of champagne. We were practically alone.

The hired waiters and maids were neither listening nor caring to listen. They were

probably counting the minutes to the happy hour when they should have supper on their own account.

There were a few other people in the tent, but they were all busy with themselves; and thus it came about that Lord Ashwell and I were as much alone as if we had been hidden in the deepest shadows of the shrubberies.

He began what he most evidently was going to say, with a clear determination to take the lead at the start, and to keep up the pace to the very finish—if the metaphor be permissible in a contest where, unless it be Time himself, the young champion has no competitors.

“I hope,” he said, “you have been thinking over what we talked about the other day. In fact you promised me you would do so, and so I am sure you have.

Of course I want to know what you have to tell me. If it is what I am longing to hear, I dont exactly know what I shall do or say, although I need hardly promise you that I shall do nothing silly. But I *do* want to say this—" I was looking at the ground, and he, I could feel was looking hard at me—"that I am determined in no case to rest until you say 'yes' at last. Of course this is very presumptuous in me, but I can stay; and if I have to stay, I will, and I only hope"—and here his voice dropped quite naturally from a tone of determination, into something almost like the accents of a child, asking for something it covets and of which its chances are problematical—"I only hope that I shall *not* have to wait. Waiting is always terrible work."

“But I have ~~hardly~~ had time to think

the thing over," I pleaded. "It is so very sudden."

"That isn't fair," he answered. "You have had five days. Surely that is quite long enough, I do really believe, to exhaust the catalogue of my demerits many times over. Merits I have none to be considered. Surely then the court need not any longer defer its judgment. Do, pray Mrs. Gascoigne, kindly let me know what I have to look forward to in life at once, and then I will take you back directly to where the lights are brightest."

"Well then, Lord Ashwell, I like you very much, and I will do all that I can to try and love you. I daresay it will not be a very difficult task."

"You mean yes?" he asked, half in doubt?

"I suppose so," I replied.

“It is very good of you,” he answered. “It’s more than I deserve. It’s more than any man in the world deserves. But I will try and prove myself worthy of it, anyhow.”

Then we both sat for a few minutes in silence. We could hear the sound of the river, and the more or less near or distant murmur of voices, and even the rustle of the foliage overhead. And then suddenly the band burst out in full force. It was the *Myosotis Valse*.

“This valse is mine, I hope,” he said, “unless you are tired.”

“Not at all tired. I shall enjoy it.” And in a moment almost we were whirling round to the music. The band played to perfection. Lord Ashwell was far more than a good dancer, in the ordinary acceptation of the term. He kept pace with the music unconsciously, as if it in some way took

possession of him, and made him move without effort or even volition. And on the other hand he almost carried his partner, although you could scarcely feel even the touch of his hand, so light was it. It was the perfection of dancing.

Round we circled, quicker went the music, quicker still. There was a rest of about a couple of bars, and then the full strength of the orchestra brought us to a standstill with one great final crash. And once again arose the pleasant babel of happy voices and bright laughter.

As I turned into bed that morning fairly tired out, and in fact almost half asleep, I could hardly help feeling certain that from every point of view I had done the right thing, and the best thing. And with this comforting reflection and happy consciousness I soon fell asleep, although in some

bushes immediately under my window a more than usually persistent nightingale was filling the air with his notes. The grounds were in the very centre of the famous so-called nightingale belt.

CHAPTER XII.

As soon as I was up and about, I hunted out Ethel, and as she happened to be also hunting up me on her own account, we very soon found ourselves alone together, not in the shrubberies but upon the lawn, where we could at once discontinue our conversation, and plunge boldly into something else, should any one break in upon us.

“I have news for you, Ethel.”

“And I have news for you.”

“Bless my soul! we are always doing, or thinking, or wanting the same thing; or having the same thing happen to us at

the same time. It's marvellous ! Well, what is it, and what is it all about ? ”

“ It's no very great secret, dear. It's simply this, that a man, who happens to be eligible and to be also a very good fellow into the bargain, has proposed to me.”

“ Good heavens, you don't say so ! And a man, who happens also to be a very nice fellow and to be very eligible into the bargain, has a second time proposed to me. It almost begins to look as if we were bewitched. Tell me now ; who is your man ? ”

“ Before I answer that, you must tell me whether you have accepted Lord Ashwell this time or whether you have been insane enough to once again send the poor man off about his business.”

“ No, Ethel, I have done the right and

the merciful thing this time. I have told him that I will do all I can to make him a most amiable and in every way a model wife, and I have sent him off, I really believe, so happy that he hardly seems to know what to do with himself. Now tell me what you have done, or rather tell me first, who your victim is."

"My victim, as you are pleased to term him, Lady Craven, is bearing up wonderfully under all the circumstances. Allow me to inquire after the health of yours."

"Mine is radiant with delight and now that we have each of us hooked and practically landed our fish, suppose we begin to compare notes. Who is your fish, what does he scale, how old is he, and is he in seasonable condition?"

"I will answer categorically. My fish is named Sir Thomas Jackson, and is an

Alderman and ex-Lord Mayor, and is very presentable in every respect. Of his exact calling I know nothing as yet, except that he is something in the City and must make a fair amount of money by pursuing that occupation, as his private residence and place of refuge out of business hours, is in Chesham Place. He may be a soap boiler for all that I care so long as he is content to do what is right and handsome in the way of settlements, pocket-money, and other such matters of detail. It is in the matters of detail, dear Miriam, that the whole secret of this world really lies. Look to your details, and the larger matters will take care of themselves quite naturally."

"So I am coming to believe. First, however, let me congratulate you with all my heart. We are such very old friends and good friends, that I need hardly do so

in a set speech, and now let me in turn tell you all about my own love affair. I have made my *fiancé* the happiest of men, and he is, I believe at this moment either dreaming of me, or else thinking of me over his after breakfast cigar and brandy and soda. For Heaven's sake, if he should come up, as he may at any moment, don't look full of guilty knowledge. Try and talk as if nothing whatever was passing in your mind. Put on what I have heard you call a casual appearance. It is a very happy phrase, exactly hitting off what it describes."

"I will look, my dear, as casual as I possibly can, and I had better perhaps begin to look so at once, for here comes the young gentleman himself."

The young gentleman himself was bearing down upon us at this juncture, and wanting

to know whence we came, and whither we were going, and what we thought of the weather, and so on, gave me at last the chance of telling him that I was going up to London on business that very afternoon, having in fact received a letter which made it necessary that I should do so.

He did not seem in the least surprised. On the contrary, he only wanted to know how long I was going for, and whether he might have the pleasure of driving me over to the station. On the first point I made his mind easy at once by assuring him that I was only going for a day, and his offer to drive me to the station I, of course, accepted. And thus it came about, in the most natural manner possible, that in a very few minutes we were all three of us back again on our way to the house.

It took me more time to find Lady Aletheia herself than to get through my necessary conversation with her when I had found her. The house was so full of people that one or two, more or less, did not practically make the least difference in any matters of arrangement. And I believe she was telling the truth when she said that she hated business herself, and was thankful to have as little of it as possible, and that she hoped, for my own sake, I would get through my own business with all possible speed, and hurry back again to Berkshire before many hours were over.

Lord Ashwell drove me up to the station, and saw me off. Arrived at Paddington, I procured a hansom, and, in about twenty minutes, found myself once again in the offices of Messrs. Wylie & Wylie.

Mr. George Wylie received me in his

usual manner, although with more deference, I fancy, than he would show to ordinary clients. And he then proceeded to extract my business from me so skilfully and rapidly that he really knew all about it before I, for my own part, was aware that I had even told him anything.

This is a slight exaggeration, of course. But it is no exaggeration of the effect which the skill and cleverness of the man produced upon you. Even if you were anxious yourself to tell him a thing, no matter what it might be, you would somehow conclude your narrative with the uneasy impression that he had got the story out of you rather against your wish. I believe that this curious force of manner must* have helped him very much professionally, although it was by no means his only recommendation.

When he had learnt what he wished to know he congratulated me very gravely and courteously. Lord Ashwell, he said, was a young nobleman, whom everybody liked, and who had never been involved in any scandal, or even difficulty; else he, Mr. Wylie, would most certainly have known all about it. His lordship was in the best set, and belonged to two or three of the very best clubs, the Carlton and White's, for instance. He was said, and believed, to have very considerable ability, and to be certain one day to make his mark in the Upper House. And then Mr. Wylie abruptly gave the conversation a new departure by asking me whether I had as yet told Lord Ashwell of, what he politely termed, the persecutions to which I had been subjected.

I answered that I had not as yet had time to tell Lord Ashwell anything, and

that my real object in coming up to town had been to ask him, Mr. Wylie, what he thought I had better do.

The man of law considered the matter for a moment, not being, according to his usual practice, ready at once with an entire solution of the whole difficulty. Then, having thought the matter out, he replied cheerfully :

“Of course you must let him know sooner or later, and before your engagement gets abroad ; or, if you do not, some enemy or other will do the thing for you. It is quite necessary that it should be done, and I advise you to do it at once. The only possible question is, will you do it yourself, or shall somebody do it for you ? Now, I would* gladly go beyond the routine of professional duty, only that I think you had better tell Lord Ashwell yourself. Then

comes the point whether you shall write to him, or whether you shall tell him, and if I were you I should most certainly tell him. He is a young man of strong common sense. He is sure to know this story already. In all human probability he has heard the case discussed several times, and from every possible point of view. If so, he will have formed his own opinion, and I have very little doubt myself as to what that opinion will be."

"But the papers were so down on me," I said.

"Leading articles in newspapers," he replied, "always accept the *fait accompli*, always say that they had foreseen it all along; always make it out worse than it is; and always moralise about it in a manner which is often sublimely impertinent and sickeningly hypocritical. No man with any confidence

in his own opinion is ever influenced by the papers. Lord Ashwell, whatever he may have read at the time, will have formed his own judgment upon your history, and I should say that his judgment would be a sound one.

“And all these things being so, I cannot help thinking that your best course is to tell him yourself who you really are, and then to suggest that he should come and see me, as I had Mr. Sabine’s confidence entirely, and can thoroughly satisfy Lord Ashwell upon any point he may wish to be informed about.”

This was evidently meant to be final, so I wished Mr. Wylie good day; was escorted by him in person to my cab, and, as I had determined to stay in town for the night, was driven at once to my old quarters at the Langham.

On this occasion, instead of going to the play, I dined rather late, with the allowance of a pint of champagne. A man after this would, of course, have smoked. I, on the contrary, sat before the fire (for it was rather chilly) with some tea and a small glass of *fine champagne*, and then wrote a letter, which, as I knew, would, if despatched by hand to the station-box at Paddington, reach The Uplands in the morning mail bag.

CHAPTER XIII.

My letter was short enough, but I knew that Lord Ashwell would be delighted to hear from me. I told him that I had got through the little shopping that had taken me up to town entirely to my satisfaction, and that I intended to return by an early train the next morning, which would land me at the station at about eleven, and that I should then drive straight to the house.

I pleaded the necessity for catching the post as an excuse for the shortness of the letter, and having made certain that it would

be sent off safely, went to bed earlier than my usual hour.

There is nothing that tells upon a woman so much as late hours. A man until long after the prime of his life can sit up all night, and then, if he will, take a plunge in the river, or, in default, a smart sharp shower bath, can go about his day's work, and get through it fully as satisfactorily as if he had retired to rest at the normal period. Women have not the physique for this, and I had no wish whatever to make my appearance the next morning at a disadvantage.

My lover met me at the station. He had had sent down from London a small stanhope, and a couple of fast-trotting cobs, which he said he wished me to try. I need not remind my reader that my little experience of driving had been acquired very late in life. But I had a natural aptitude for it,

and I could feel as I took the reins that the horses knew their mistress, and that Lord Ashwell could see as much.

A professional stage coachman would, I should imagine, have described my performance as neat and pretty. At all events Lord Ashwell was delighted with it, and complimented me very sincerely. I was glad that I had the driving to do, for it gave me something over which to think, and so prevented my touching dangerous ground. When we reached The Uplands I promised that I would join him at the rustic house by the campshead as soon as I had changed my travelling-dress. This operation I performed with great care, trying to make myself look at my very best, and I really think succeeding tolerably well. Then I made my way down to the water's edge, and there found

Lord Ashwell throwing pebbles more or less aimlessly into the water, and evidently in an extremely restless frame of mind.

He began at once about myself, and about our marriage. How soon was it to be? and when and where was it to take place? and how soon might he tell all his friends about it? At present he had thought it best to keep strictly to the very letter of our understanding, and to tell no one. But, of course, the thing must be known sooner or later, and he did not really see any reason why it should not just as well be made public at once. Why should we not tell the Fox's, who were kind people, and would be sure to be pleased; and have the whole thing put in the *Post* in the shape of the customary announcement? There was not the least occasion for any

mystery, and for his own part he wanted the news to be made public property as soon as possible.

He was evidently in earnest, and not at all in a humour to be put off. All that I could do was to beg him for a few days to let matters rest as they were.

"I have no doubt," I said, "you will think me fanciful, so perhaps I am. In fact, I think that all women are fanciful more or less. I can only ask you for just this once to bear patiently with me, and to humour my fancy. A day or two, or even a couple of weeks (for which I do not ask, and have no intention of asking), is a very little matter after all, where two lives are concerned. As for our marriage itself, I have no wish to postpone that indefinitely, or, in fact, at all. I only want a few days more."

“Well, my darling,” he answered, “it is idle to pretend that I am not disappointed, for I am, and I think I have a little reason to be. I always hated mystery, and I wanted to have had the whole thing out at once. It must be, however, as you please. For the present I will say no more about it, but we cannot, of course, prolong our stay here indefinitely. The best part of the people have gone already, and the rest will soon be going. For my part, I think the sooner we let the thing be known, and without giving people any unnecessary time to think about it and chatter about it, get married up in London, and are off to the Continent, the better it will be. Cannot you give me any idea?”

Upon what slight circumstances our whole life often lingers. I felt strongly—almost irresistibly—tempted then and there

to tell him everything ; but my evil destiny prompted me to put off doing so. I was tired with my journey, with late hours, and with the excitement of my triumph, and perhaps also I was vain enough to believe that a little something like coquetry might not be altogether without avail. So I put the matter lightly by telling him that I should very probably make up my mind that night, and that I would certainly let him know before dinner the next day.

Then we made our way up through the reddening plantations to the house, for, early as it was, the mists were already beginning to lie heavily on the meadows, and among the reeds and sedge.

We parted in the hall, and I made my way to my own room. I had looked to one or two little things, and was beginning

to think of going downstairs to luncheon, when Ethel burst into the room.

"I have to be off at once to Paris, my dear," she began. "I won't bother you with my affairs. You have quite enough of your own to occupy all your attention; but go I must, or I most certainly would not be leaving you at this particular crisis. I have looked at the Bradshaw, and all the other authorities, and I find that if I leave here at five sharp, I can just manage to do matters comfortably. All my packing is completed, my formal adieux have been made, and there is now nothing left for me but to be ready for the carriage when it comes round to the door. Meantime I have a letter for you which has been forwarded from Paris, where it was addressed care of myself. It is idle to pretend that I

do not know the writing, for it happens to be that of Prince Balanikoff. Open it at once, my child, and let me know what that most estimable of Russians, and least bearish, has to say for himself."

I complied, more or less mechanically, and with a certain amount of uneasiness. I was passing through a very severe and sharp crisis, and my nerves were strung to the most extreme point of tension.

The letter itself did not take by any means long to read, or to master its purport. It was not brief, but it was trenchantly to the point.

"Jockey Club, Paris,
"October 24th, 18—.

"MY DEAR LADY CRAVEN,

"It is just possible that it may be some time before this letter will reach you. I do not know where you are, and

I am aware that in England, at this time of the year, your movements are very likely to be erratic.

"I am here in Paris, and find it certainly pleasanter than either St. Petersburg or London is likely to be. All the same, I cannot help wishing that I were at Cairo, or Damascus.

"Why am I writing to you? Of course I have not forgotten the stern interdict under which you have virtually placed me. Of course I am wrong in breaking it. *Mais, que voulez-vous?* News, sometimes, come to me in odd ways, and I have heard news of yourself, and, to tell you the truth, of Lord Ashwell. I hope what I hear may be untrue, as his lordship is a most estimable specimen of a young English country gentleman, and would, no doubt, make a model and extremely

affectionate husband. Of that I have no manner of doubt. But it is only my duty to let you know, as soon as I possibly can, that you are threatened with danger. The exact story of your life is likely at any moment, and when you least expect it, to be sprung upon you. You will then find that you have plenty of fighting to do, if you are even to hold your own, so you consequently cannot be too thoroughly forearmed.

“ Meantime, my own love for you remains unaltered. I told you truthfully that it was, and had been, the one passion of my life, and it remains so now. At any time, and under any circumstances, my old proposal to you, and the promises attached to that proposal, hold good. I will leave Russia for ever, and let you choose for yourself our place of abode.

“If you want me, as I am almost certain you will, and much sooner than you think, telegraph to me here, or come to me here, whichever you prefer. I have a sort of fancy that you will come, and so shall not leave until I hear from you.

“I could write pages; but I have said all that is necessary, and will now wait until our next meeting.

“Yours till death,

“BALANIKOFF.”

I handed the letter to Ethel, and said: “Read it for yourself, my dear, and tell me what it means. Your brains are sharper than my own by far. For myself, I confess, that it fairly puzzles me.”

Ethel read the letter over, not once, but two or three times, until I felt certain that she had thoroughly mastered it. Then she

handed it back to me with an enigmatical expression of countenance. She was evidently at once amused and bewildered, and yet not at all anxious or disquieted.

“He is a funny fellow, dear Miriam,” she said, “very persistent, and very terribly in earnest. But I always told you that he meant well. As for reading between the lines of his epistle, the task is an easy one—far easier than the small pea under one of the three little thimbles. He is making a last desperate effort to get you to accept his proposition, and is trying to frighten you. What, however, you have to be frightened about, I fail to see. If I were you, I should certainly not answer the letter; but I should none the less keep it as a curiosity, which, indeed, it most unquestionably is. And whatever you do, mind as soon as you are married, and have got

Ashwell to yourself, that you make a clean breast of everything to him, and leave him nothing to find out. There will be a scene, no doubt, at the first, but through that you must struggle, and you will end by being firmer lovers than ever, and, better than lovers, friends. For friendship is better than love in proportion as it has confidence in it, while love is always a passion, and consequently more or less irrational, capricious, and uncertain, if not, indeed, at times entirely treacherous. Marry him at once, my dear Miriam, and then the very day afterwards have the whole thing over."

"But you do not seem to understand, Ethel. I mean to tell Lord Ashwell everything before I marry him. In fact, I *must* tell him before. You forget I have seen Mr. Wylie, whose advice entirely chimes

in with my own previous determination. Besides, as Mr. Wylie told me, if I married in any name but my own, the marriage would be an idle ceremony entirely null and void, and then all sorts of complications would follow."

"Well, darling," said Ethel, "there is only one thing certain at cards, and that is that the cards cannot always be against you. Of that I am quite confident. Your bad luck up to now has been persistent, cruel, and almost malicious. It is high time that the tide began to turn. I for my own part feel pretty certain that it has turned already, and I consequently vote that we keep our own counsel and for the present say no more about the matter. There is the luncheon bell, and I have my old Alderman to pacify. He will be furious at my having to go over to Paris,

and I do not mind telling you that he is the kind of animal who wants a good deal of smoothing down. I shrewdly suspect that he has ruined his digestion with thick turtle and Mansion House punch, and that his digestion has ruined his temper. *Nous verrons.* When I am Lady Jackson, I will put a ring in his nose and pipe to him; and my bear shall dance to my own tune or I will know why. You shall see, my dear. You shall see." And we went down to lunch.

CHAPTER XIV.

THAT afternoon Ethel started for Paris. She had, somehow or other, managed to pacify her Alderman, and, in fact, left him on the best possible terms. I accompanied her to the station, and bade her an affectionate farewell.

“We shall soon meet again, darling,” were her last words; “I hope to be back within ten days.”

I returned to The Uplands with a sense of oppression that I could neither account for, nor yet shake off, and a sort of vague foreboding of evil to come. I suppose, in

reality, it was the effect of Prince Balanikoff's strange warning.

Lord Ashwell took me down to dinner that evening, and although, of course, he was kind and courteous, he yet studiously refrained from anything like demonstrative attention, knowing my objection to our names being coupled together for the present, and mindful of his promise to me on the subject.

I was very glad indeed when the time arrived that it was possible for me to retire, for I felt thoroughly worn out with anxiety, doubt, and a sort of dread of the unseen evil with which I was apparently threatened. But when I got to bed no refreshing sleep, nor, indeed, sleep of any kind, came to bring me relief, and I tossed about all night a prey to vague misgivings and unpleasant reflections. I

lit my candle and tried to read, but I found it impossible to concentrate my attention for two minutes together, so that I was forced to give up the attempt as hopeless. I got up and paced up and down the room and then went to bed again, but the result was precisely the same. I could not sleep, do what I would, and I was finally compelled to accept the inevitable, and to remain awake the whole night.

It is most tiresome work remaining awake all night. People talk lightly of it if they have not tried it, and do not know what it means.

“Stop awake all night,” you will be told, “why, it’s the best fun in the world. Whenever there is anything good to be done in the morning, I always take the

most particular care not to go to bed. Once go to bed and you can never trust yourself. You may sleep on like the princess in the wood."

That is what you are often told. For my own part, I hold with the old Duke of Wellington, and with the great bulk of soldiers, that you ought to regard sleep as a sort of divine blessing, and ought to studiously cultivate the art of going to sleep at a minute's notice.

Suppose you have forty minutes to spare at a railway junction. Why should you weary out your system by walking up and down the platform? Fee a porter on promises. Tell him you will give him sixpence to rouse you up when the train comes in. The porter gets his sixpence, and you get your forty minutes' sleep, which

is cheap at the rate of three farthings for each five minutes.

I was in no hurry to figure early that morning. Being no longer a child or even a girl, I knew that in the fresh light of dawn I should appear to a disadvantage. "Avoid two things," Ethel used to tell me, "one of these is the lime-light; never let it fall upon you unawares. It may be turned on at a moment's notice, and it may ruin inevitably all your chances, however carefully prepared, for the remainder of your days. Wherever it throws its sudden and baleful glare it turns the whole place into the very last Palace of Truth which you, on your own account, would choose for a moment. The next thing to be avoided is a morning interview. People in the morning are always crusty, suspicious, and bad-tempered. If you have to approach any

one with whom you are playing a game of chess, be careful to select the hours after dinner. Women are apt to forget that men are only mortals, and that the great bulk of them fall very far below the average test."

In a country house your absence until the dinner hour arrives is no matter of notice. You are there to please yourself and you do so. I consequently lay in bed, dressed when the time came at which it pleased me to do so, with the most extreme leisure, and so sallied down to the grounds. There had been no letters for me, and this very fact was in itself a comfort. There is nothing more calculated to spoil your temper, for the rest of the day than a big batch of letters all of the ordinary type. You may be sure, ninety-nine times out of the hundred, that the individual who writes to

you does so for his own purposes and because he expects to get something out of you. The famous Lord Hertford used to say: "I never open a letter until it is a week old, and it is astonishing to find how many of my letters answer themselves."

In this humour I went down to the grounds. I am not defending my frame of mind. You may call it defiant, you may call it what you please. It seemed to me that I held all the cards in my own hand, and I was still not in the prime of life, but only on the threshold of that delightful period. I consequently was restless, impatient, and in the very last temper calculated to provoke or to encourage reflection.

I wandered about the grounds until the bell in the turret of the tower to the stables rang out the signal for lunch.

Life is full of matter-of-fact circumstances. As it happened, I wanted to change my clothes, and to go through the operation known as "tidying" myself. This result achieved, I hurried down radiant with smiles and good nature.

I ought to describe the luncheon-room at The Uplands. It was fitted like the coffee-room of a club. There were any number of little tables, at any one of which you took your seat. There was a side-board with colossal joints and pies upon it. There was a table with all the papers. There was a big letter-rack. The Fox's knew perfectly well that if you want to entice your friends into coming to visit you and into stopping with you when they have come, you must do the best you can to turn your house, so far as all its domestic arrangements are concerned, into a hotel

at which no charges are made, and no weekly bills presented.

I entered the room more or less heedlessly. It had never occurred to me who might be there, or who might not. I had in my own mind reckoned up the company, and was not prepared for any addition to it. I was consequently fairly startled, when, at the other end of the room, I saw—entirely himself, with all his self-possession about him, looking almost twenty years younger than his age, holding forth with the loquacity of a gossip, and the assurance of a professor, and evidently considering himself the heart, centre, and focus of the entire company—no less a person than the husband whom I had once most solemnly vowed to love, honour, and obey.

It was a distinctly difficult position. I believe it was Mr. Gladstone who once said

that there were always three courses open to him. The first was to do something—whatever it might be. The second was to do nothing at all. The third was to steer a middle course, and to wait upon events. On this third course I decided.

Evidently it was a nuisance to have Sir Henry Craven cropping up as a Marplot. Also it was beyond my power to have him kicked out, or warned off the course, or otherwise told that he made one too many in a pleasant circle already completed, without any regard to himself. In the British Museum is a meteorite about the size of an ordinary omnibus, and composed of solid iron. It fell from the skies somewhere in Siberia. Siberia is an out-of-the-way part of the world. It is not in the diocese of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and is consequently neglected by Providence. Here

was Sir Henry exactly like that meteorite, only that he was not worth a sixteenth of its weight as solid gun-metal.

I was looking steadily at Sir Henry when he looked up, and our eyes met. I made him a very formal bow, but it was with an expression in my face which intimated: "Try your worst. You and I know perfectly well that the scabbard is thrown away. I do not expect quarter, and if you mean fighting, I can fight as well as yourself."

CHAPTER XV.

I REMEMBER George Sabine once telling me how he got the best of a very abusive Yankee harbour-master. The Yank talked with every variety of oath, anecdote, abuse, and blasphemy for about an hour. "When," said George, "he had blown his wind and stopped spouting, I asked him whether that was all. He replied that it was. I then told him, not in these exact terms, that I was devotedly grateful to Providence." My look at Sir Henry was to much the same tenour. It meant, and it was intended to mean, "if you have a tongue, so have

I. If you talk, I can talk." And with this expression stereotyped into my features, I looked at him and waited for his look in reply.

I have always said that I considered him a stupid man, but with a certain amount of pomp and management of detail when he might be fully prepared with all the circumstances. And in this world, stupidity is apt to rank as wisdom purposely hidden under a veil of cunning and caution. Not knowing what to do, Sir Henry did nothing, but he also looked hopeless, helpless, and perfectly bewildered. Now a diplomatist ought to be no one of these things.

A sort of *diablerie* prompted me to shake my finger at him, but he was so obviously on the losing side of the board, that I forewent the advantage. When I

looked at him again, I noticed that he was drinking curaçoa and brandy, by which I was able to conclude that his nerves had been a little shaken, and that he was in a state which Americans would describe as one of disorganisation.

Luncheon over, I strolled away by myself down to the river. It would be idle to pretend that I was not restless and uneasy. The old Egyptians at their dinners, to which women were not admitted, were wont to commence the drinking by handing round the finest wine, in a bowl fashioned out of a human skull. There are two interpretations of this custom. One is orthodox, and to this effect.

“Recollect,” said the Egyptian host, “that in the midst of life we are in death.”

The other has a grim sense of humour in it:

“We must all die,” said the skull. “After death there is nothing for us. Nothing, at any rate, for *us*. Take your drink and take it out of a skull. Laugh at death while you can; for death will have the last laugh at you.”

My skull at the banquet had been Sir Henry. There he was. I could not conjure or explain him away. I only felt sure that his presence meant mischief. He might, or he might not, hold his peace. But the probability was that he would go about all over the house telling everybody everything. It was wicked of me, no doubt, but I should have liked to have been able to kill him thoroughly and completely without being found out. Not that I am afraid of death by any means, but there are many ways of being killed, and to be hanged on a public

scaffold is neither a pleasant mode of exit from this world nor a dignified one.

While I was thus reckoning up my chances on the board of life, I turned a corner among the infinite windings of the shrubberies, and there face to face with me stood Lord Ashwell.

In one respect, and in one only, I had the advantage of him. I knew the very worst which he could certainly know, nothing beyond what he might have picked up and added to by conjecture. I, in other words, had batteries in reserve; but as against this must be put the fact that I was now an old strategist, and that it is the old strategists who are always beaten, for the very simple reason that they follow stereotyped rules of the game, and are consequently unequal to a sudden emergency.

The meeting was a little awkward. Of

course there was mischief in the air, and I could not possibly tell what cards he might be holding in his hand. But I could see that his manner was embarrassed and uneasy. Therefore I conjectured the worst, and prepared myself to face it. One thing was evident, that he was in a highly excited and irritable mood, as, in fact, his very first words proved.

“ It is very unpleasant, Mrs. Gascoigne,” he said, “ when unpleasant things like this happen. I suppose they must happen sometimes, but for my own part I like to get them over. I have no wish to put any question which may be painful to yourself, or which I had not a perfect right to put. But I believe you know old Sir Henry Craven. He is down here, and he has been saying a very great deal about you. I cannot suppose for a moment that he is

telling downright lies. There must be something in it. He may have his own view of the matter, and he may be, or he may not be wrong. I do not think very much of him. But what he has said calls for an answer. In fact it calls for an answer which I can go back and give him. I am very sorry for all this trouble, and I only hope to Heaven that you can help me out of it."

Here clearly was no room for falsehood, or fencing. Delay might give me a brief time; but the time so gained would be worth nothing. I could not make the man fonder of me than he had been, and for all I could tell, still was. If I could have married him first, and broken the ugly story to him afterwards, it might have been a different matter. But now there was no time for reflection. My only chance was to

make a virtue of necessity, to throw my cards on the table, declare my hand, and call on him to play to it.

“You mean,” I said, “that my right name is not Gascoigne. You mean that I once was Lady Craven. Well. You know my story as many other people know it. I could give you my own version of it, which I do not suppose you would believe for a moment, or allow to affect you in any way. You must take the tale as it has come to you. If you knew the whole truth of it, you would be sorry for me. But even the whole truth would not explain away the facts. I quite know that. You know the facts, and you know the worst. The interpretation of them is another matter. I am ready to interpret them, but cannot explain them away.”

What does a French *maitre d'armes*?

tell you if you are at all in doubt? Your own hand is hampered. You cannot tell what your antagonist may be meditating. There is but one rule. "*Frappez et désengagez.*" Then you can settle down again to the game.

"Surely," he said, "the matter is easy enough. You were introduced to me as Mrs. Gascoigne, and you came down here as Mrs. Gascoigne. It now turns out that you are not Mrs. Gascoigne at all, but that you are Lady Craven. The explanation of that is for yourself. It is the kind of thing which I do not understand, and to which I am not accustomed."

"I had intended to tell you everything. My life has had a history, and the history of a life cannot always be compressed into a few sentences of space, or a few minutes of time. I did not mean to have

any secret from you, and there is nothing whatever which, at this minute, I wish to keep or hide from you. That is all."

"The whole thing," he replied, looking at his boots and not at me, "is very unfortunate, and I must also add—very unsatisfactory. I cannot see any way out of it. You admit you are not Mrs. Gascoigne. You admit that you are here, to say the least, under a misunderstanding. Misunderstandings are unpleasant things. The difficulty in this case is most certainly not of my making."

"The difficulty need not trouble you," I cried. "In fact, it does not exist. I absolutely decline to be considered as upon my defence. You are dissatisfied with what you have heard of me. Let it be so. You are going from this place, and so am I. Let

us part as if we had never met, and let us take very great care never to meet again."

"I am sorry," he replied; "but I am afraid it must be so. I see no other way out of the matter. There are always troubles in this world and we have to face them. You never can tell when your turn may come, and when it does come, the only thing for you to do is to take your chance as best you can."

"You may be right," I said, "and I dare say you are. The matter, however, is not one to be argued out between us. You had better see me as far as the house, and when I am in its shade, we can part. We shall probably never meet again, and we certainly are not likely to break our hearts for each other. The world

has room in it for the two of us, and our orbits in all human probability will never again cross."

We walked back to the house side by side without another word. I think if he had said it was a fine day or had asked me what were the chances of skating in the coming winter, and whether I liked skating, it would have driven me mad. But he did nothing of the sort. His silence was phlegmatic and English. We marched along so slowly and steadily that I could almost hear each single stone in the gravel crunch under his feet. Then we reached the porch and I said good-bye, and, without waiting or even looking at him, hurried into the house.

Inquiries soon satisfied me that Lady Aletheia was in the house and able to receive me. I found her, or rather was

taken to her in a little room which I can best describe as half boudoir; half writing room.

In a very few minutes Lady Aletheia entered. Her bearing was not perhaps aggressive, but was unquestionably chilly, and was evidently intended to produce a corresponding impression.

"I have to go," I said, "Lady Aletheia, and I wished before I went to bid you good-bye, and to thank you for your hospitality."

"Oh, indeed," she answered. "You are going, Lady Craven? Well! People come and people go. Perhaps it is best that leave-takings should be brief."

I had risen when she came in, and she had not herself taken a seat, so that we were both standing.

"It is perhaps best they should be brief,"

I replied, “especially when they are final, as ours is likely to be.”

“I quite agree with you,” answered Lady Aletheia, and she turned on her heel, and I heard the rustle of her skirts as she swept along the corridor.

We have, so far as I know, no exact English equivalent for shaking the dust off your feet. My fly came; my boxes were put on to it; my gratuities to the servants were duly made; and I very soon found myself in the train for London, divided between a novel from the bookstall and the view from the window.

Arrived at the Langham, I telegraphed to Ethel.

“I shall start for Paris by the 9.40 train tomorrow morning. Meet me, as I am tired.”

And this missive despatched, I proved

its sincerity by falling asleep in a chair until the chambermaid roused me between eleven and twelve o'clock, and took my final orders for early departure. She did not seem astonished at my drowsiness. It takes a very great deal to astonish a chambermaid at the Langham.

All things have an end—even the journey to Paris. Before starting, I went into a chemist's shop and asked for a sleeping draught, and, by way of letting the man see that I knew what I was about, I told him that I was suffering from insomnia. He was a stout, good-natured man with an impenetrably stolid countenance. He asked permission to feel my pulse, and then inquired whether I had ever tasted rum. I replied truthfully that I was only familiar with it by the smell.

“Then, madam,” said he, “try a little internally, and as hot as you can take it. It is a powerful soporific, and will send you to sleep at once. And as its aroma lingers in the breath, you had better let me put you up some musk lozenges.”

I burst out laughing. What an excellent world it would be if people would only be pleasant and tell the truth! I took up my lozenges, and further discharged my obligations by purchasing a bottle of Eau de Cologne. I need only add that his advice was entirely correct. The President of the Royal College of Physicians himself could not possibly have given me better.

I did not trouble myself with thinking. My mind was absolutely made up. I had closed the book of the past, and was going to begin life over again. Late, no doubt, I was, but, as the proverb runs, “better late

than never." Gather your roses while you can. Or, as I fancy I remember Horace said, "*Carpe diem, quam minimum credula posterio.*"

From the Gare du Nord, where Ethel met me, bubbling over in her usual fashion, but as tender-hearted, sympathetic, and true as ever, we were driven hurriedly to the Rue Royale. By the time we had got there Ethel knew all I could tell her, not only with regard to what had taken place, but also as to my plans for the future.

"And you have made up your mind, my dear, to do as he asks?"

"Yes, I have thought it over. I won't say, as the Dean would, that I have prayed over the matter, but I have considered it thoroughly. In the first place, I like Balanikoff; in the second place, he is a gentleman;

in the third place, I mean to do as I choose. Don't you remember my old yachting story of the bo's'un: 'If any man isn't happy aboard this vessel, why, by the Lord, I'll make him know what for.' That's my frame of mind, my dear. I'm aboard this vessel, and I'm perfectly happy."

"Of course you are," she said; "and so am I. Good people always are."

About two months after these events, I received a very long and very characteristic letter from the Very Reverend the Dean of Southwick. He was in the most terrible distress. Wishing to add to his stipend, he had been induced to invest largely in the Consolidated British and Foreign General Financial Advance and Discount Company, which was to pay a minimum dividend of fifteen per cent. The

Company had burst up. In other words, it was in liquidation, and was likely to remain so, as long as there was a scrap of flesh left upon the grisly bones for accountants, receivers, trustees, and other such unclean vultures to pick at. To avoid disgrace and exposure, he had been compelled to set aside twelve hundred a year out of his fifteen. What he was to do he did not know. It was the divine will and he must bow to it. At the same time, I surely would not refuse out of my abundant income to aid him in this sore trial, and to enable him to have at his disposal, not the luxuries of life, for which he had never cared, but its stern and bare necessities.

It was very wrong of me, but I laughed over the letter, and profanely remarked that

Ally Sloper was at it again. Then I wrote my answer.

“Paris, 2,001 Bis, Champs Elysées.

“December 28th, 18—.

“MY DEAR FATHER,

“I am deeply moved at your sad story. I owe you my life and all the happiness that my life has brought me. I should be worse than inhuman if I were not most deeply grateful to you.

“My bankers have instructions to place a hundred pounds at once to your credit at the Old Bank, Southwick, and to make a similar payment on each quarter-day.

“At the same time, it is just as well that you should know where this money comes from. It is a part of the price for which I have sold myself, soul and body, to Prince Balanikoff. It is now two

months since I wholly renounced the allowance I had been receiving from Sir Henry Craven.

“Take the money, my dear father, and be careful over it, and make it go as far as it can. *Non olet.* I dare say that your misfortunes have not made you forget your Latin.

“Your Daughter,

“MIRIAM.”

By return of post I received the following reply :

“The Deanery, Southwick,
December 29th, 18—.

“MY DEAREST CHILD,

“First, let me thank you with all my heart for your most generous and

welcome aid. My days are numbered, and, in all human probability, I shall not tax your bounty long. But I am happy to know that I still retain your affection. The more the years roll by the more closely do you remind me of your sainted mother.

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. I have always seen the full force and singular beauty of that divine command, and have humbly endeavoured to mould my life in unison with it.

“Morganatic marriages, such as yours, are, in its wisdom, recognised by the Greek Church, a communion with which I have always been in the closest sympathy, looking forward as I do with earnest faith to the ultimate reconciliation of Christendom. The more closely we follow petrified dogma

the further we wander from the light,
and the life, and the truth.

“ I am, always, my dearest Daughter,
“ Your most devoted and affectionate Father,
“ AUGUSTUS VANDELEUR ST. AUBYN.”

I really feel that this delightful epistle
speaks sufficiently for itself and its writer,
and needs no comment of my own.

THE END.

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